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the ACOUSTIC GUITAR podcast

Join us for conversations that explore why we play, collect, build, obsess over guitars and how rewarding it is to make music of our own. Each month, we connect you with great guitarists—from preeminent pickers and fingerstyle sensations, to master teachers, luthiers, songwriters, and the community at large.

In the most recent episode of the Acoustic Guitar Podcast, nylon-string guitarist and singer **Badi Assad** discusses composing and arranging, how to sing and play at the same time, and the importance of emotion and experimentation. Listen and subscribe at AcousticGuitar.com/podcast or wherever you get your podcasts!

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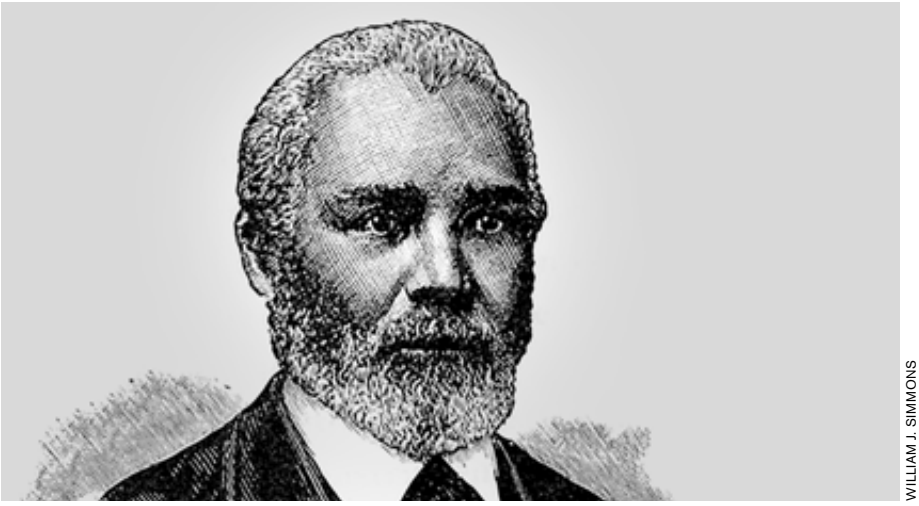
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THE FRONT PORCH

Justin Holland



WILLIAM J. SIMMONS

It is difficult to overstate the importance of Black guitarists in American popular music. Robert Johnson, Son House, Charlie Christian, Wes Montgomery, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Elizabeth Cotten, Chuck Berry, Jimi Hendrix—the list goes on and on, and we are all somehow indebted to their many contributions to the development of blues, folk, jazz, rock, and other idioms, and for stretching the possibilities of what the guitar can do.

In this issue we cover two brilliant young musicians, both of them millennials, whose work is informed by a careful study of older Black players from different worlds. Mark Small profiles Christopher Mallett, a guitarist and educator based here in the San Francisco Bay Area, who first learned of the pioneering 19th-century American classical guitarist Justin Holland as an undergraduate in the early 2000s. Holland is a largely forgotten figure, and Mallett has made it his mission to bring his work to light through a series of concerts and a beautiful new album out now on Naxos.

Dom Flemons, who rose to acclaim through the old-time string band Carolina Chocolate Drops in the mid-2000s, learned guitar at the feet of Black fingerstyle masters like Algia Mae Hinton and John Dee Holeman. As the American Songster, Flemons has a repertoire that spans more than a century, much of it inspired by the Black experience in music, not just blues and folk but also country and western. Strikingly, Mallett and Flemons explain that most audiences buying Holland's guitar arrangements in the 19th century, or listening to country on the radio in the 20th, did not even realize that the creators behind the music were Black.

To get a particular kind of old-school sound out of a comfortable modern instrument, Flemons commissioned a pair of steel-strings from Todd Cambio of Fraulini Guitars, and they have become indispensable companions. If you have ever considered ordering a custom guitar to suit your style and aesthetic preferences but have felt too intimidated by the process, check out "Made to Order" on page 26. This guide explains how to get exactly what you want, whether through a legacy company like Martin or an independent guitar maker such as Greg Brandt, whose bold-looking recent concert classical is featured in Great Acoustics.

Inaccuracies occasionally surface on these pages, and they pain us every time. The July/August issue's Great Acoustics article on John Monteleone's Rocket Convertible suggested that the preeminent archtop luthier invented the sliding metal doors on the guitar's soundports. However, credit must be given to guitar maker and inlay artist William "Grit" Laskin, who used a similar design on his first soundports in the late 1980s.

You may notice a change to *AG*'s masthead in this issue. Senior editor Blair Jackson recently retired after a long and successful career in music journalism, including writing several books on the Grateful Dead. He is already missed, but luckily will continue writing for us. In Blair's place is now Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers, the magazine's founding editor and a valuable contributor over the years. Jeffrey will also continue to provide the incisive lessons and features that he is known for, including this issue's Weekly Workout exploring double-dropped-D tuning and Guitar Talk with Kenneth Pattengale and Joey Ryan of the Milk Carton Kids.

Together, we look forward to bringing you coverage of all things acoustic guitar, contemporary and historic, and always welcome feedback on what you would like to see in your magazine.

—Adam Perlmutter
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GUITAR TALK



BRENDAN PATTENGALE

Kenneth Pattengale (left) with his 1861 German guitar and Joey Ryan with his Romero banjo

Small Wonders

The Milk Carton Kids deepen their sound and songwriting on *I Only See the Moon*

BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS

For a dozen years, the Milk Carton Kids have explored the sonic potential of two voices and two acoustic guitars—singing in silvery harmony over the gentle pulse of Joey Ryan's fingerstyle rhythm, while Kenneth Pattengale probes the edges of consonance and dissonance on lead guitar. With the exception of their band-oriented 2018 album *All the Things I Did and All the Things I Didn't Do,* Ryan and Pattengale have maintained this tight focus on what they can accomplish as an acoustic duo, both onstage and in the studio.

That quest continues on their new album, *I Only See the Moon,* but it has broadened in unexpected ways. For the first time, Pattengale served as their producer—building on his experiences at the helm of albums by Joe Pug, Cordovas, Joy Williams, Chris Eldridge and Julian Lage, and more—and Pattengale and Ryan also had their own studio in North Hollywood to work in. With the freedom to dig deeper into writing and arranging on their own schedule, they expanded their instrumental palette with varied guitars as well as clawhammer banjo, Hammond and pump organ, and Mellotron, and even brought in a string orchestra on the title track. All these sounds create a rich atmosphere while retaining the emotional intimacy of perhaps their strongest set of songs to date.

I caught up with Ryan and Pattengale by Zoom, with Pattengale sitting in their studio in front of some favorite guitars—including a prewar Gibson L-00 miraculously rescued from Hurricane Katrina.

After years of living in different cities, how did it impact your music to be together in L.A. again?

Pattengale: It's a big change actually. We didn't realize those many years we were apart that [living nearby] makes it a lot easier to work together, run a business together, write together, and record together.

Ryan: We spent a year making this record, which I don't think you can do unless you live in the same city. We got through three weeks of it, which was how long it was supposed to take, and then Kenneth said, it's not good. I agreed and was relieved that he said it out loud, because I think if there was a flight booked for him to go back to Nashville or New York or me to go off somewhere, probably we would just have taken the record we had in the can after three weeks and put that out. We never would have been honest with ourselves about how we didn't like it. Instead we took a whole extra year, working every day to write new songs and record them and find the identity of the album, which we now think is probably our best one.

What exactly did you feel was missing or coming up short?

Ryan: For me it was just the songs. At the time, Kenneth said they're kind of all over the place, except for two songs we ended up keeping ["Wheels and Levers" and "One True Love"]—these really seemed to be pointing in a direction. Then it was exciting to start with those as a kernel or a North Star to be guided by, and just write a whole new batch of songs.

Pattengale: Yeah, everything's about the songs. That's all it ever was. It's not like anybody's perfect, even the best bands of all time. You know, the Beatles had some real stinkers, and they slipped onto albums. But the stinkers can't outweigh the timeless songs, and they always ended up on the right side of that equation.

I think what we're most proud of on this record is ending up with an authorial voice that was headed somewhere and felt truthful—and didn't feel like songwriting exercises or constructions.

Ryan: One thing I hope won't sound like self-flattery is, you know, I think we can sing and play anything and make it pretty; we could take a song that doesn't mean that much to us and make it sound like nice music. But on this album, it was important to us that the lyrics felt sharp and purposeful as well as personal.

I'm digging the banjo-and-guitar combo on some of the new songs. Joey, back in 2015 you told me you were playing banjo but not ready to go public. What was the impetus behind tapping into that old-time banjo sound?

Ryan: I learned the banjo to begin with on the tour bus with Sarah Jarosz and her band, when we did a collaborative tour in 2014. The sound engineer, Mark Richards, is also a great clawhammer-style banjo player, and she and he were jamming old-time songs the whole time.

One of the modalities of songs I learned is in G modal tuning [G D G C D], and usually it's pretty ominous sounding. I learned a version of "Wayfaring Stranger" in that tuning, plus a bunch of other songs that I won't remember the names of now, but they were usually about something terrible happening.

I wanted to take this sound and feel and put my own songwriting lens on it. And "One True Love" came out—it's like a little bit of a cross between "Wayfaring Stranger" and the Gillian Welch song "One More Dollar." And then the other one ["When You're Gone," recorded in the tuning E A E A B but played live in standard banjo open G tuning, G D G B D, capo two] is an ode to my love for the banjo and banjo songs and the people who taught them to me. It's a little meta—a banjo song about banjo songs.

So for you, Kenneth, playing guitar over banjo rather than a deeper sounding guitar must completely change the landscape.

Pattengale: I had to use a whole other guitar—a 000-18, just off the shelf at Martin. Julian Lage has a 000-18 from 1939 that is maybe the best guitar I've ever played. Once I played that one, I never bought a 000-18 because I could never find one as good as his. But then I realized I needed it, so I called up Martin and they sent me one. It works great.

That would fill out the low end much more than your usual guitar.

Pattengale: My [1955] 0-15 is such a particular thing that lives on top of other sounds. It's like a pointy little needle. With that triple 18, you get all the lower harmonics and overtones that feel like more like a bedrock.

Guitar wise, are there any other changes in what you're doing in the studio or onstage? You've had so much consistency with instruments for so long, with the combo of the Gibson J-45 and Martin 0-15.

Ryan: Yeah, but I switched guitars entirely on this record, and also now for live. I don't really play my Gibson anymore.

Live, I play a [slope shoulder] Martin DSS-17. We've been in a good partnership with Martin for many years. Kenneth has his own signature model, we've been to the factory and the museum, and I've played so many Martins that our friends have. But I'm always looking for something that feels like me, in the way that my '51 J-45 does. George Gruhn brought this DSS [to a show], in the black smoke colored pattern, and I was like, "This sounds like a J-45."

Then the sound guy who travels with us, Jason Cupp, convinced me that it'd be better if I played a guitar with a little more legibility, mostly on the low end. He was having trouble getting what he wanted out of my guitar. This DSS-17 sounded enough like me that I was willing to try it out. He was super happy with it once we got it plugged into our live setup. So that's what I take on the road now, and I have to say, traveling with a new guitar that can be replaced at a moment's notice, versus an irreplaceable vintage guitar—just the stress level alone is worth it. But I think it also sounds better up front.

So that's the stage guitar, but in the studio I used a different guitar—it's one of Kenneth's guitars.

Pattengale: It's a 1932 L-00, 12 frets to the neck. Mark Stutman had it up in Waterloo [Ontario, at Folkway Music; see the March/April 2021 issue]. The story goes, it floated away in Hurricane Katrina and lived in the water in the Gulf of Mexico for a couple of weeks and then he ended up with it.

Ryan: There's still silt in it.

Pattengale: Yes, silt and barnacles and stuff inside, and the belly's distended like an inch below the bridge, but it sounds great. It weathered that storm very gracefully as it were. That's all the guitar Joey plays on our new album, with the exception of the last song, where he plays one of my little 0-15s [from 1956] with nylon strings.

Also Martin sent us a 12-string guitar—a David Crosby signature model. It's a really lovely guitar and on the album, too.

You've been writing songs together for a dozen years and also now have your own music camp, the Sad Songs Summer Camp in the Catskills. What has your experience been like trying to impart what you know about songwriting?

Pattengale: Well, it's our favorite time of the year. It's truly such a unique experience.

The big secret about songwriting is that songs are, I think, fundamentally different than other forms of writing—journalism, poetry, novels, screenplays, things that require a lot more time and a lot more faculty. Songs are like little windows into the soul, and they're not necessarily governed by or requiring quote-unquote good writing or formal writing. You know, most of what you're responding to in a good song is just the person that it comes out of.

So people come from all over the world to learn how to write songs from us, and really the only trick is teaching them how to open up in an intentional way to show some side of themselves that's worthy of expressing in a song. After that, it's the uniqueness of their own writing talents, their imagination, their worldview, and their personality that actually does all the heavy lifting for what is a good song and what's a compelling song.

And so [teaching songwriting is] this really wonderful exercise in just being able to show up and essentially be a champion of a safe space for people to express themselves in a way that feels true and authentic and honest. And then of course, the huge benefit is you're there in real time to witness and receive it.

Joey, do you have a similar perspective?

Ryan: I'd second that and add that I just love teaching. I have to say, I didn't think we would have anything to teach or would particularly enjoy it. I dreaded our first camp a little bit going into it, but it turns out to be one of the most rewarding things on our calendar.

You know, you go around for 12 years and you do this thing obsessively, and you don't realize how much you've actually learned and how much you actually have to offer in terms of perspective or lessons. It feels really good to engage with people who are on a similar journey, even if a majority of the people at the camp are not even trying to be professional songwriters. But that's kind of the point: it's just the craft for its own sake. Having engaged in it for so many thousands of hours, it's fun to talk to other people who are doing the same thing and get really deep on what it is we're trying to do. AG

WHAT THEY PLAY

Onstage, Joey Ryan plays a new Martin DSS-17 and an open-back five-string banjo from Canadian luthier/musician Jason Romero. Kenneth Pattengale plays a 1955 Martin 0-15 with steel strings.

For years, the duo performed with a single Ear Trumpet Labs Edwina mic. Now, for their guitars, they supplement the Edwina with wireless output from Trance Audio Amulet pickups. Ryan's banjo has a Schertler Resocoil contact microphone, also wireless.

They use Kyser capos and Martin strings and rarely change strings. ("They sent me a box of about 12 packs of strings ten years ago," says Ryan, "and I'm on my third pack.") Pattengale uses light-gauge 80/20 bronze strings and yellow Dunlop Tortex picks (.73mm). Both rely on Hoffee cases to keep their instruments safe on the road. *—JPR*



TIMOTHY DUFFY

A Picker and a Scholar

Dom Flemons brings a deep knowledge of roots music to his work as the American Songster

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

Sometime in late 19th century, a colorful type of musician emerged in the southern United States—a songster who would wander around singing a broad range of repertoire, from ballads to folk songs to dance numbers. At first joined by separate musicians playing banjo and fiddle, and later using guitar to provide self-accompaniment, the songster was a precursor to the prototypical blues musician and by extension so much of American popular music.

More than a hundred years later, Dom Flemons, aka the American Songster, recasts the tradition by putting his mark on tunes collected from a century of roots music—from field hollers to folk and country songs—playing not just the customary guitar, banjo, and harmonica but other more traditional instruments like fife, quills, and rhythm bones.

Over the last couple of decades, Flemons has assembled his repertoire through scouring record bins for historic and rare finds, learning from old recordings, and connecting the dots. He has become a music scholar and historian in large part through poring over the liner notes in his music collection, currently around 5,000 records broken down into scores of categories, and he now shares selections on his monthly show *The American Songster Radio*. At the same time, Flemons has built on the fingerstyle guitar approaches that he learned firsthand from blues masters like Algia Mae Hinton in the mid-2000s, when he was in his 20s and beginning his music career in earnest in North Carolina.

While in that state, Flemons co-created the Carolina Chocolate Drops with fellow multi-instrumentalists Rhiannon Giddens and Justin Robinson, doing much to hip new mainstream audiences to old-time string band music. In 2010, the group won a Grammy award for Best Traditional Folk Album for its album *Genuine Negro Jig*. Flemons has experienced similar success with his unique surveys of old-time music as a solo artist, beginning with his 2007 debut, *Dance Tunes, Ballads and Blues*. More recently, his 2018 album, *Dom Flemons Presents Black Cowboys*, explored the role of African-American musicians in the development of country music and earned him a Grammy nomination.

On his latest album, *Traveling Wildfire* (Smithsonian Folkways), Flemons, now 40 and based in Chicago, examines the Black experience in country music on his own song "Slow Dance With You." He also explores a wide range of other territory, from a cover of the unreleased Bob Dylan song "Guess I'm Doing Fine" to the original instrumental "Rabbit Foot Rag," a spirited number based in the ragtime tradition. (See a transcription on page 52.)

I talked to Flemons about his journey to becoming the American Songster, how he found his voice in assembling his expansive repertoire of old and new songs, and what makes the ideal acoustic guitar.



NATE KINARD JR

As the American Songster, you have a repertoire that covers many decades of roots music. How do you preserve the songs while putting your own imprint on them?
One of the ways that I like to think about presenting my music is to have a balance between songs that I haven't written and songs that I have written. When I interpret an old-time number, there is a style. There are certain aesthetic qualities that make that older style. It allows it to be unique sounding, and also it tells a lot about the time, place, and space the song came from. And so when interpreting old songs, I try to make sure that they sound familiar, but that they're also brand new expressions of this music.

How do you find that balance?
I try not to just repeat things I've heard before. I try to make sure that whatever I'm putting out there sounds unique to people who may not be familiar to this music—as well as those who are, people like record collectors and other folks that are deeply invested in the old-time music and its sound. And so I try my best to not just copy stuff outright, but to create a little extra space for it.

How has being a record collector yourself helped you develop your repertoire and see all these connections between the idioms and eras you cover?
When you collect the records, then you get to hear the songs. And I'm always searching for that new sound, that next song that will give me just that inspiration to come up with a new tune, or any type of thing like that. That's one of the things as a collector that is unique—just being able to take that time to find all the little subtleties. Sometimes you hear a recording by an artist that only a few people have heard before. And being able to reinterpret their music, it's great to be able to present it back.

Someone like Papa Charlie Jackson or Henry "Ragtime Texas" Thomas would have two different songs that I was interested in. And when I started to listen to their recordings, I then found myself inspired to do their songs because a lot of people hadn't covered their material, compared to someone like Robert Johnson, who's much more well-known.

On a recent episode of the Acoustic Guitar Podcast, you mentioned that you've synthesized your own style by finding curious riffs and figuring out how to play them. Talk about some of your key discoveries along the way.
I definitely would say with a lot of the pickers from North Carolina, people like Blind Boy Fuller, John Dee Holeman, and Algia Mae Hinton, hearing them on record was very, very powerful. Being able to pick in a way that allows you to mimic the sound of two guitars playing at the same time was a revelation to me when I first heard it. You get so much sound out of just one person. And so I tend to do that in a good deal of my numbers, displaying this particular style of using the thumb-led bass note and then putting a little bit of melody on the top. That's one part of it, and of course Henry Thomas was a big influence because he played the quills [an early American folk instrument, panpipes made from cane tubes] and the guitar. For me that was a way to make my way over into playing the quills and playing music that preceded the blues.

Since you came into playing guitar before the advent of YouTube, did you have to learn on your own, or did you use the few existing books and videos that were on the market? How did you acquire your great fingerpicking technique?
Well, there were books that were around in the public library, and so I was able to find some music and tablature there. One of the best instructional video series that I was able to get my hands on was Stefan Grossman's Guitar Workshop, several of those books and DVDs that he had put out.

But a lot of my learning came from just listening to the records closely and being able to copy what I heard, at least finding the chords and the melodies and working on how they fit within the sound that I was hearing. Then when I moved to North Carolina for a while, I started to sit with different pickers. I would go to their houses and spend time with them, and that was how I began to learn a whole other way of playing the guitar and playing this old-time music.

What was it like to learn that way?
Well, for me it was Joe Thompson and John Dee Holeman, and then Algia Mae Hinton, and another fellow by the name of Boo Hanks—I spent a lot of time with them through a nonprofit organization, Music Maker Foundation. I became a go-to backup musician for these players. And when you learn in that traditional sense, a lot of times you just have to learn on the fly and figure out what chords are going to be played. With that, you start being able to anticipate where someone's going to go, because as a backup musician, your goal is to make the person that you're backing up look great.

After having spent the time backing up many of these musicians, I was able to play the songs myself. And so then I could put my own stamp on them because I had learned at the feet of the masters. In making my own music, it was always something where I had some grounding to start out with, so then I could create my own arrangements that would be unique.

How did you become the American Songster?
One of the things that led me to become the American Songster was that as my interests










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NATE KINARD JR

grew, I realized that I was interested in more than just blues music or country music or old-time music. I found that since I had a repertoire of music, the songster—which is a term from the late 1800s—fit what I was doing more so than just trying to say I was just a blues singer or folk singer. There was a way for me to expand the definition of what I could be doing onstage. And it was an old enough term that it sounded new to people at the same time.

But in a way, I started out like a lot of people. I picked up records of singer-songwriters from the '60s and '70s, and there was also a lot of the early rock 'n' roll from the '50s and '60s that I really loved. From there I began to go down the rabbit hole slowly but surely. And of course, before the internet, going down the rabbit hole was a much more intensive process, because I had to go to each of the places to find the items that would lead me to the next step. It took quite a bit of time to go through all of that.

How might your music have been different if you had been in your developmental years when so many of the sources were available with just a click?

I think it was very important that I learned what I did before the internet, especially for performing the songs of a person like Papa Charlie Jackson, who isn't really as well known as other blues singers. When I was learning his stuff, there wasn't anybody to tell me what Papa Charlie Jackson's music was all about or anything about Papa Charlie himself. I had to learn everything on my own, and I had to find my own sources. I also had to find my own way to interpret his music. And most of the time now, you have a video on YouTube that'll just tell you all those things.

So in some ways it allowed me to have a longer gestation period to develop as a musician. At the same time, it's very much ingrained in my mind—not something that I just learned because I had a wild fancy to learn the music and then left it at that. I really got to internalize the music, spend a lot of years thinking about it, and later spend a lot of time re-analyzing that music.

On your website, you wrote that the past few years have been a time of deep reflection and meditation for you. What insights have you gained from this period, and how are they reflected in the new album?

One of the things that happened was I had to go deep into my own mind and figure out why I liked doing music and what my whole journey in music was about. What I ended up finding was that I am a person who really enjoys records and playing the music for people. Thankfully, that's where I landed when I went deep into my own psyche about it.

But the biggest thing was just not having the constant forward motion of traveling and touring standing in the way of deeper reflection. I left my home in Arizona in 2005, and by 2020 I had been on the road for the better part of 15 years. And so the pandemic allowed me to take that time to sit back and sift through my thoughts. That was something I probably wouldn't have done if everything hadn't been shut down.

And I started to pull out a few songs that I had written early on, the two on the new album: "Slow Dance With You" and "It's Cold Inside." Those are older songs that I had written a while ago, and I was able to start pulling new things out of my ether that I might not have done if I hadn't been sitting in a lockdown.

"Slow Dance with You" is about the Black experience in traditional country and western music. Can you talk a little bit about how it applies to this specific song and your repertoire more generally?

My first introduction to country and western music came from my African American father, who was always a big fan of country music. One of the things that tends to get lost is that a lot of country music is heard over the radio. Because of that, it doesn't have a color; if you're just hearing a song, you're not actually seeing the musicians who are playing it. A lot of people have referenced country music as being a big part of their upbringing, and my dad was no different in that way.

So my introduction to country music came very early on. And with country music, it's all about the storytelling. With "Slow Dance with You," I wanted it to be a very simple story of a couple. I didn't make it too specific about if the couple was together, or had been together, or was going to be together. And it talks about that moment of connection just during one single slow dance.

In the past several years, I've heard a lot of people thinking about African American contributions to country music. And so what I decided to do is really focus in and create some material that satisfies that need. That's why I have "Slow Dance With You," "Dark Beauty," and "If You Truly Love Me," where they have overtones and aesthetic qualities that touch upon the Black experience with love.

You also unearthed an old and unreleased Bob Dylan song. What was it like to bring that to life on your album?

Well, "Guess I'm Doing Fine" is an interesting one, because I had heard it around 20 years ago, on this collection I had called the *Genuine Bootleg Series*. It's kind of thumbing its nose at Dylan's official bootleg series albums. I had heard it along with another song called "Long

Time Gone." They were part of the series of demos that Dylan did for the M. Witmark & Sons publishing company.

On these particular set of demos, there were a few songs that he hadn't put out on an album, and "Guess I'm Doing Fine" has these beautiful words about resistance on a very personal level. When I had the chance to reach out to Dylan's people and ask if I could perform one of his songs for the album, they suggested "Guess I'm Doing Fine." I thought it was just wonderful because of its message about the ways that even if you've got nothing except yourself to fight the good fight, there's a way to do that.

When we got all the instruments together and cut it in the studio, I could tell that it needed a fiddle part. I'm actually playing everything on that recording except fiddle. And I was very pleased to get in touch with Sam Bush, who put a really great fiddle track on top of it. So it was great to get that particular Dylan song and to be able to expand its musical palette, because it was originally just a solo guitar number by Dylan. Just to be able to break it into a sort of bluegrassy type of vein and then to get Sam Bush to add the fiddle on top was the real icing on the cake.

It turned out beautifully, to say the least. I understand you have lots of instruments, and each one has a special story. What acoustic guitars are in your collection right now?

The acoustic guitars that I have on hand are these two wonderful instruments made by the luthier Todd Cambio out of Madison, Wisconsin. His company is Fraulini Guitars, and they're a very special type. Both are the Angelina model. When Todd was putting the guitar together, we sized it so it had a grand concert body and then a regular-sized neck [with a scale length of 25-1/2 inches, rather than the model's standard scale of a long 26-1/2 inches]. That way, it would be easy for me to hold onto it, but it would still have extra mid-range bass that could really pop on the recordings. So those two have been great friends to me; they are my main guitars that I always keep with me.

What about them speaks to you?

Well, having that really bassy midrange is one of the things that speaks to me as a guitar player. Because a lot of times I am fingerpicking, I tend to be right in the middle part of the guitar. Both of my Fraulinis are so clear and crisp when I'm fingerpicking. It just warms my heart every time I pick one up.

It's great that you found a pair of instruments that you've bonded with like that. What other guitars are you gravitating toward?

Another acoustic I have is a banjo-guitar called Big Head Joe. It's a giant six-string banjo, tuned like a guitar, which comes from an interesting sort of forgotten chapter of American music. It was made circa 1919, so it's over a hundred years old. Just to be able to present this special instrument to the world through my recordings—like on "Saddle it Around" on the new album—has been a real treat. It also produces a really wonderful low, mid-range bass sound that is just beautiful; it does everything that an acoustic is supposed to do and then some. AG



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Christopher Mallett

JACK KLOECKER

Black Guitar Legacy

Christopher Mallett shines a light on pioneering American guitarist and composer Justin Holland

BY MARK SMALL

Christopher Mallett is among a growing international coterie of ascendant classical guitar virtuosos of African descent. With Black heritage on his father's side of the family and Italian on his mother's, Mallett has an abiding interest in African American musical forms that ultimately led him to the music and life story of Justin Holland (1819–1887), America's first classical guitar master as well as an early civil rights activist.

Mallett's latest album, *Justin Holland: Guitar Works and Arrangements*—the follow-up to his 2015 debut, *The Porcelain Tower*—sheds long-overdue light on Holland's contributions to the classical guitar world. On the album's tracks, Mallett breathes new life into music that has languished since Holland's passing more than a century ago. "This project has been dear to my heart for many years, and I am excited to share it with the world," Mallett says.

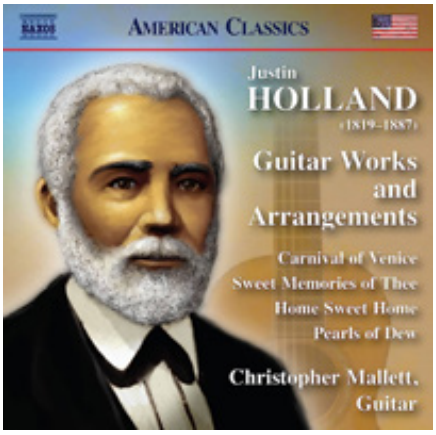
To learn more about the Holland project and Mallett's path as a guitarist, I caught up with the busy performer and teacher by phone at his home in Northern California.

ELECTRIC ROOTS

Mallett's musical journey began inauspiciously in San Diego. The guitarist, now 39, picked up the electric in his teen years after his father showed him the chords to "Wild Thing" and "Peggy Sue." He began playing with bands doing 1990s pop punk and, later, neoclassical metal. "I wanted to play guitar professionally but didn't know how to go about it," Mallett says.

A fan of metal guitar virtuoso Yngwie Malmsteen, Mallett enrolled at Grossmont College in El Cajon, California, in hopes of polishing his electric guitar chops. "My parents listened to classical music at home, and when I saw that there was a classical guitar class at Grossmont, I figured it could make me better at what I was playing," he shares.

Mallett showed up at the first class, with instructor Fred Benedetti, with an electric guitar. "When Fred played 'Asturias' and 'Malagueña' for us, it blew my mind because I had never seen a classical guitarist perform before," Mallett recalls. Benedetti advised Mallett to get a proper nylon-string, and at 19, he bought his first classical instrument and completely altered his musical course.



Mallett studied privately with Grossmont guitar instructor George Svoboda for two years before transferring to Oberlin Conservatory where, as a classical guitar major, he completed his undergraduate degree studies with Stephen Aron. "I worked on my technique and explored repertoire with Steve," Mallett states. "He got me ready to audition for Yale School of Music, and I was accepted there in 2007."

Earning his master's degree under Benjamin Verdery's guidance at Yale was pivotal in Mallett's development. "Ben opened my mind to what you can do with the classical guitar, and that's a huge reason why I wanted to study with him," Mallett says. "I always loved his playing and that he did nontraditional music like songs by Hendrix and Prince, while also composing and arranging a lot of music."

A SIGNIFICANT DISCOVERY

When he was still at Grossmont College, Mallett stumbled across Justin Holland on the Library of Congress website. It was a revelation. He says, "I saw some of his guitar music, read through it, and thought, Oh, my gosh, a Black classical guitarist in America!"

Mallet couldn't find much information about Holland and became obsessed with learning about his life and music. He reached out to Donald Sauter, a guitarist whose website has a section documenting Holland's works, and asked him for help in getting copies of Holland's scores kept in the Library of Congress. "He was living in Maryland then and went there, copied the music, and sent me a huge package of it," Mallett says.

Mallett was persistent in pursuit of Holland's music, knowing there was more beyond what Sauter had given him from the Library of Congress. Around 2015, he went to California State University, Northridge, where he found more of Holland's music in the Vahdah Olcott-Bickford Collection.

"As far as I know, I now have copies of everything Holland composed and arranged for guitar," says Mallett. "There are arrangements of American and European popular and folk songs, but also opera pieces he arranged for solo guitar and two guitars as well as numerous voice and guitar pieces."

PROMINENT CITIZEN AND MUSICIAN

Mallett has been compelled as much by Holland's music as his life story—a tale of overcoming difficulties and succeeding on sheer talent and determination in a time in America when societal attitudes were arrayed against him. Born into a free Black family in Virginia, Holland moved to Massachusetts at 14. In Boston, he worked as a laborer and took lessons in guitar, flute, and arranging. Wanting to learn more about music and guitar in particular, he relocated to Ohio in 1841 for concentrated study at Oberlin Conservatory, an institution that welcomed Black students in the pre–Civil War era. After a few years, he went to Mexico to round out his education.



According to one biographer, Holland traveled to Mexico after Oberlin to learn Spanish so he could study the methods of Sor and Aguado in their original language. "He dug deep and became a true educator," Mallett says. "He was a template for what most classical guitarists are today: teacher, arranger, and composer."

Back in Ohio in 1845, Holland married Delphine Howard Minor and settled in Cleveland, where he became an in-demand guitar teacher. In his 1987 doctoral dissertation, *Justin Holland: The Guitar's Black Pioneer*, William Banks posits that Holland preferred teaching to playing concerts, perhaps because racial attitudes limited his performance opportunities. He began writing arrangements for his students —ultimately penning about 300— and began publishing them in 1848.

"He became like a house arranger for S. Brainard's Sons and other publishers," Mallett says. "As soon as a new song came out, they went to Holland. After his guitar arrangement was available, it would become a hit." Additionally, Holland authored two critically hailed guitar method books, which sold briskly across the nation. Mallett adds, "Many of Holland's early customers and even his publishers didn't know that he was Black."

According to a paper by Barbara Clemenson ("Justin Holland: Black Guitarist in the Western Reserve"), Holland was the first Black professional in Cleveland. "That the first Black professional was a classical guitarist is huge!" Mallett says. "Cleveland was pretty open at that time and was the last stop on the Underground Railroad."

19TH-CENTURY TIME CAPSULE

Having gotten to know Holland's guitar oeuvre, Mallett felt a high-quality recording of selected works was warranted and successfully pitched the idea to Naxos Records. "I couldn't think of a better label for this project," Mallett says. "Music by every major composer from the 19th and 20th centuries is represented in their catalog, and I really felt Holland deserved to be there. We decided to focus on the popular tunes rather than the opera arrangements. I spent a month reading through the music to find what I considered to be the most compelling set of pieces to introduce Holland to the world. A few pieces on the album are world premiere recordings, not just in their guitar arrangements, but because some of the original versions for piano are not recorded."

One such premiere is Holland's arrangement of "Delta Kappa Epsilon, Grand March." Written originally for piano by Holland's contemporary

Alfred H. Pease, it honors the college fraternity to which Pease belonged. The piece opens the album, and Mallett easily handles its lively melodies, insistent beat, pedal tones, chordal punctuations, and modulations.

The album features a mix of Holland's treatments of American folk, popular, and hymn tunes as well as songs and dance forms from Europe. A collection of pieces like these on guitar, Mallett says, "presents a time capsule of what America was hearing in the 19th century in the view of a classical guitarist."

European entries include the Italian air "Benedette sia la Madre," two polka mazurkas (the 3/4 dance then in vogue on the continent), as well as a schottische, a dance step popular during the Victorian era. "Spanish Fandango" features a traditional melody that Holland casts in open-G tuning, making possible an attractive variation in harmonics. Holland employed theme-and-variations form in many works heard on this album. The variations for songs such as "Home Sweet Home" or "Carnival of Venice, Fantaisie" offered Holland's students a chance to explore various arpeggio patterns, scalar bursts, and more on beloved songs of the era.

The influence of 19th-century Spanish guitar giant Francisco Tárrega is readily detected in the numerous portamentos connecting melody notes in "Stephanie-Gavotte, Op. 312" and "Carnival of Venice, Fantaisie." Echoes of Fernando Sor surface in octave passages in "Antoinette Polka Mazurka" and "The Maiden's Prayer." The jaunty, dotted rhythms of "Rochester Schottisch" call to mind the music of Mauro Giuliani, among others. The sole Holland composition is "An Andante in C Major." "It's reminiscent of Sor's 'Introduction and Variations on a Theme by Mozart' with its quick arpeggio variation," Mallett says.

In addition to releasing the album, Mallett published the music in a new book called *The Essential Justin Holland* (Les Productions d'OZ), making Holland's music more readily available to guitarists. Currently, Mallett is planning solo concerts of Holland's music across the country, and he hopes to introduce new audiences to the music of one of the earliest American guitar virtuosos.

"I want the performance structured so that I can talk about his life in between the pieces," Mallett says. "For many, this will be the first time they have heard Holland. He had such an interesting life that talking about it will make the audience enjoy the music even more." AG

What He Plays

Christopher Mallett plays a 2016 Glenn Canin 640mm-scale, double-top guitar with cedar for the top and inside layers, and Indian rosewood back and sides. For the bottom four strings, Mallett uses D'Addario XT hard tension (string 3 is carbon). His top two strings are D'Addario EJ46 Pro-Arté hard-tension nylon. —*MS*


Duo Noire

JACK KLOECKER


DuoSF

TERESA TAM

The Power of Two

Beyond his solo career, Mallett is an active collaborator with other guitarists. Years ago, Benjamin Verdery paired Mallett for duets with fellow guitarist Thomas Flippin at Yale's Norfolk Chamber Music Festival. "We immediately loved playing together and became great friends," Mallett recalls.

Flippin and Mallett have since released two albums as Duo Noire (Flippin is also of African American heritage). Their first album, *Figments* (2014), features the six-movement minimalist suite of the same name by Raymond J. Lustig. Their sophomore effort, *Night Triptych* (2018), showcases works they commissioned from six top female composers.

In 2015, Mallett and guitarist Robert Miller, as DuoSF, released *Corta Jaca*, an album of Latin American and Spanish music. Additionally, Mallett and Miller are the co-founders and co-directors of California Conservatory of Music, with locations in Sunnyvale and Redwood City. The school has nurtured guitarists who have won top prizes at the GFA youth, junior, and senior competitions, as well as the James Stroud Competition in Cleveland, and serves 1,400 students studying guitar, piano, and violin.

"We also do community engagement through the nonprofit we run called the Peninsula Guitar Series," Mallett states. "Our advanced guitar students teach students throughout the [San Francisco] Bay Area who generally can't afford lessons." —*MS*



The Music Emporium's Andy Cambria with the proud owner of a new custom Santa Cruz guitar

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MADE TO ORDER

A guide to commissioning the custom guitar of your dreams

BY GREG OLWELL

While there are countless new guitars to choose from in nearly every size, shape, and wood combination across a wide range of price points, some players need a special instrument. Perhaps you're seeking a reproduction of a rare vintage model, a guitar with specs tweaked to your personal needs, or maybe a brand-new creation that no one else has ever seen. If so, commissioning a custom build can be a uniquely thrilling experience.

Even for those who already have a quiver of fine guitars, collaborating with a luthier can result in an instrument that satisfies performance needs, creative desires, or both. For some players and collectors, the process is almost a hobby in itself, with repeat customers cycling through a builder's waitlist



Jayne Henderson, EJ Henderson Guitars and Ukuleles

PHOTO COURTESY OF JAYNE HENDERSON

and returning for a new instrument every few years.

From factory custom shops that churn out special orders on a large scale to one-person operations, you can get a one-of-a-kind instrument made just for you and often have a courtside seat during the process.

As exciting as it can be, even experienced guitar buyers might feel intimidated or overwhelmed by the ordering process and have many questions. What do I want? Will it sound as good as I hope? What happens if I don't love the finished product? Of course, those are all genuine concerns for anyone diving into the unknown, so I set out to learn more about the ins and outs of commissioning a custom instrument and what you can do to make sure that you end up with the guitar of your dreams.

WHY CUSTOM?

Many custom orders are variations on classic models. These guitars might have a set of eye-catching, exotic tonewoods and added decoration, or simply a neck profile that fits your hands better than the standard model.

Another compelling reason to commission a custom instrument is to replicate a prized vintage model that's too expensive, scarce, or unreliable to travel with. "A lot of those vintage guitars are cost prohibitive and aren't something you'd want to take on the road with you," says Todd Albright, who plays prewar blues and ragtime on a modern replica of an early baritone 12-string. "It makes a lot more sense to get a new guitar that is an exact copy of a guitar made in the '30s, which can sound, look, and feel the same as an old guitar, but without the vintage guitar problems." Albright swears by his custom Fraulini Paul Geremia Signature, based on an extremely rare Regal-made Tonk Brothers 12-string, with birch back and sides and a paper-thin, lightly braced spruce top, for a tone that he calls "trashy-sounding and unrefined, which is exactly what I'm looking for."

Many of the large- and medium-size guitar makers—Martin and Taylor, along with boutique brands like Bourgeois, Collings, Huss and Dalton, Preston Thompson, Santa Cruz, and others—offer custom versions of their standard models through their dealer networks. In these cases, an outside sales representative serves as a consultant who acts as a sounding board for your ideas and helps you sort through the laundry list of wood choices, decoration, and much more to be



TOM DALY

Brian Dickel (left), with Kimberly and Mark Dalton of Huss and Dalton Guitars

selected for the build. This makes the shop a buffer between customers and a maker's busy production floor. Kimberly Dalton, the general manager of Huss and Dalton, says, "It's time-consuming working on a custom build, and this allows us to build and the dealer to handle the customer. Ultimately, that's what that dealer is there for."

Though this pathway generally provides less of a one-on-one relationship with the person building your guitar, it can be beneficial to have a well-known name on the headstock if you plan on reselling at some point or would like a more predictable outcome.

Some makers also offer customers the chance to hand-select the details that go into their unique guitar. "If somebody wants to come to the shop and actually select their woods and talk about their custom build, we can do that," Dalton says. "We also look at bindings and whatever else they're interested in, including duplicating specific neck profiles."

As one of Martin's Custom Shop Expert dealers, the Music Emporium in Lexington, Massachusetts, is on the frontline of the legacy maker's large workshop. The Music Emporium's acoustic and vintage specialist, Andy Cambria, helps customers with custom orders for Collings, Fairbanks, Santa Cruz, and others. When I ask Cambria what happens when someone inquires about a custom build, he has a surprising response. "To be honest, more often than not, I try to talk them out of it," he says. "Custom ordering a guitar is only a good idea if you have a very specific request about dimensions or the neck's playability or if you're going for a super-specific visual look."

'If somebody wants to come to the shop and actually select their woods and talk about their custom build, we can do that.'

—KIMBERLY DALTON

Players may have other motivations for commissioning an instrument, he adds. "If somebody just read about Bill Collings or Richard Hoover and was like, 'I just love this person and their whole ethos and theory about instrument building. I want to own one of their guitars'—that's as good a reason as any to custom order a guitar."

Ironically, Cambria says the sound is frequently the last consideration when somebody custom orders a guitar. "If you're going after sound, it's always better to find something that exists, even if you have to hunt for a year, which is how long it will take you to get the custom guitar," he advises.

THE BESPOKE EXPERIENCE

If you're in search of a maker who is pushing the boundaries of what a guitar can be, who specializes in designs that've been otherwise been lost to time, or whose unique take simply catches your fancy, choosing an individual luthier may be the ultimate choice for a unique guitar and buying experience. It's a process


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FOR EVERY STAGE

that can involve a lot of direct contact and collaboration on the design with the person whose hands will build your guitar.

The allure of being involved in a build is compelling, and working directly with a luthier on a plan for a guitar can be exciting and even addicting—from visiting the builder's shop and picking out woods to dreaming up the next guitar.

Several makers report that many of their clients are repeat customers. Pepe Romero Jr., a luthier who makes classical guitars and ukuleles and is also a member of the esteemed Romero family of guitarists, has a three- to four-year waitlist for one of his handmade classical guitars, and about 30 percent of his customers return for another guitar. "They love knowing one is coming," he says. "They love the process, and during my two-month build process, they love knowing that I'm working for them."

Playing an instrument from an luthier before ordering can be difficult because these one-person shops have low production outputs—often in the low double digits per year—and multi-year wait times, and they sell all that they can build. While you might not be able to easily find some of these guitars outside of the internet, there are still a few opportunities to get a good sense of what they are all about.

A few shops, like Dream Guitars in Weaverville, North Carolina, and the Golden Era Guitar in Singapore, specialize in representing luthiers. There are also annual boutique showcases like the Artisan Guitar Show, La Conner Guitar Festival, and Woodstock Invitational Luthier's Showcase, which give players a chance to check out guitar makers' work up close in person, start a dialogue for a commission, or maybe even bring home a custom instrument.

GET WHAT YOU WANT

The key when working with a guitar maker on a commission is the same as it is in any relationship—good communication. For the greatest chance of successfully conveying what you need, extensive field research is essential before you settle on a build. And that means playing as many guitars as you can. With long wait times for many builders, it's never too early to start playing every guitar and sorting through your likes and dislikes.

Cultivating a relationship with a dealer is an excellent way to explore your options. This part of the process is obviously easier for people living near areas with one or more guitar shops that carry high-end and boutique guitars, but it's still possible to educate yourself on your preferences wherever you are. "Spend a couple years, at least, playing everything that you can get your hands on," says Cambria. "Even the boring-looking ones, because you might find one of those that really lights a fire in terms of the sound it produces."

Cambria suggests that if you live near a shop, try to develop a relationship with somebody that works there. "Your lead-in can be very honest," he says. "Just say, 'I'm not going to buy anything today, but I'm starting a process. I want to get it through you guys. Would you mind showing me the way? And would you mind letting me play these things knowing that I'm going to be doing business through you?'"

Since many custom builders have waiting lists of a few years, use this time to zero in on your preferences for body and neck shapes, wood choices, and other features. For sound and playability, a few makers commented that the most important thing to focus on is the top wood and bracing. "It's probably the most neglected part of the custom order process, because everybody is obsessed with the exotic look of the back and sides," says Cambria. Though these can be gorgeous and attractive parts of a guitar, many makers feel that other features, such as a thin finish, use of hide glue, and especially the shape and thickness of the neck, rank higher in importance for tone and feel.

When you are working directly with a luthier on a design, the conversations often veer into your style and needs. "It's always helpful to know your playing style and to have an open mind about what might work best for it," says Jayne Henderson, owner of EJ Henderson Guitars and Ukuleles and daughter of famed luthier Wayne Henderson.

Todd Cambio, the luthier behind Fraulini Guitars, notes that the way you play factors into the critical details of your guitar. "If you're going to sit on the couch and play in open tunings, and you like a lot of resonance and overtones, you might want a shorter scale," he says. "But if you use a flatpick and play really fast jazz or bluegrass, you want a longer scale for more string tension and a quicker note decay." Romero, Cambio, and Henderson said these in-depth talks with customers can help define what the player is looking for based on their playing style, musical tastes, and techniques.

THE PROCESS

Depending on the size of the guitar maker's operations, the ordering process can vary. Going

WHAT IF YOU JUST DON'T LIKE IT?

While you've waited for your dream guitar, made to your exacting tastes, you've no doubt fantasized about its sound and feel. Often it's just as hoped for, but what happens if it finally arrives and you don't feel a connection with it? Are you stuck with an expensive instrument that you don't like? How it resolves mostly depends on the individual builder's or shop's policies.

Typically, once you receive a custom build from a medium or large guitar company, it's yours. They made it to your specifications and fulfilled their end of the bargain, so there are no returns or refunds. What happens next may be between the buyer and the dealer who managed the guitar order. Having satisfied customers is essential to these independent dealers, so the shop might end up falling on the sword when a custom order doesn't work out for the player. "No matter what was said or signed before the whole process started, we don't stick people with instruments that don't work for them," says the Music Emporium's Andy Cambria. Often, the store can move the custom guitar to a new owner, while the customer can apply a credit to another instrument in the store.

The small builders who deal directly with clients also want happy customers. While they do not typically offer refunds, they usually have more flexibility to provide the customer a few options. In most cases, the luthiers I spoke with say it's only happened two or three times out of hundreds of instruments, so it's a rare event.

"I tell people there's no stress with having to buy this guitar," says Jayne Henderson. "If you don't like it, I'll resell it. I'm not scared about that because I know the guitar will go to who it's supposed go to and you'll find the one you want."

—GO





Todd Cambio, Fraulini Guitars (left); Pepe Romero Jr.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TODD CAMBIO AND PEPE ROMERO

through a maker's dealer network often involves a contract and a deposit, often 25 percent. The order is sent to the maker, and a guitar returns to the shop in as few as several months to more than a year. The completed guitar usually goes to the guitar shop that ordered it—the dealer might like to show off the guitar on its website and social media before passing it along to the customer—but sometimes the maker will drop-ship directly to the customer.

As you might expect with a smaller builder, the process can be more direct and hands-on. Since several years can often pass from when a customer gets on a waitlist to when the guitar is completed, many luthiers prefer to wait until their client's number is up to commit to the build, collect the deposit, and begin the design. That window not only helps manage the workflow for a busy small shop but takes into account that some customers may have to drop out of line due to unforeseen financial or other circumstances.

Once the build is finally underway, some makers like to share shop images on their social media channels or through email. While the workflow complexity of larger workshops, like Martin's Custom Shop, means they can't document each guitar's build, small shops may provide regular updates as the instrument takes shape. "I post my work every day," says Romero. "People get to follow the process visually and see pictures of things coming along. It's much more exciting for them than to find something completed." Sharing pictures can also help the maker make important changes before it's too late.

The allure of being involved in a build is compelling, and working directly with a luthier on a plan for a guitar can be exciting—and even addicting.

For the past few years, Henderson has used Facebook Live on Saturdays to invite people into her shop while she works on some aspect of building. "I plan it so I have a quiet thing to do, like putting on binding or messing with the small things," she says. These broadcasts are more than just showing off shop techniques. "I love it when they ask questions, and there have been several times where a client is watching and they get to be part of it. I like that—it's a nice connection."

Ultimately, the relationships between guitar makers and their clients are meaningful for both parties. "I really enjoy working with people and figuring it out," says Cambio. "I enjoy getting to know my customers and working with them on getting the right instrument, because people are putting their faith in me."

That sense of trust and helping to make someone's dream instrument come to life also helps carry Henderson through the long and lonely days at the shop. "I love the partnership and getting to know people," she says. "I love that I get to be a catalyst to bring someone some happiness." AG

HERE'S HOW



ELIAS JONASSONN

Get in Sync

Try these simple steps to sing and play guitar at the same time

BY BOBBY WEINAPPLE

You've been working on your instrumental chops for a while but now find that you are longing to add another element to your musical life—accompanying yourself on guitar while you sing. Maybe you've written some personal lyrics that only you can deliver, or you want to share the message of someone else's song, but in your own voice and style. At first, doing both at once can seem daunting, but the simple steps outlined in this lesson can make the process of learning how to play and sing at the same time much easier and more enjoyable.

1 DON'T CHASE TWO RABBITS AT ONCE

Begin by separating the two elements of singing and playing, working on only one thing at a time. First, track your accompaniment and sing along to the recording, so your focus can be entirely on your vocals. Then reverse that—record your vocal a cappella and play your guitar along with the vocal track. (A metronome or basic percussion beat can really help with this process.) You don't need to make high-quality studio recordings; a simple voice memo on your smartphone will suffice.

2 THINK LIKE AN ACCOMPANIST

The main rule of accompaniment is to avoid overpowering the voice and lyrics of a song. The vocal part should be the focus, with the guitar serving to enhance the lyrics and the message. There may be a solo between verses, or an instrumental interlude where the spotlight is on your playing, but while you are singing, let the guitar serve the song rather than draw attention to itself.

3 KEEP IT SIMPLE AND THINK RHYTHMICALLY

Leaving space for the lyrics can greatly enhance the impact of a song. For example, where you might have played full arpeggios when doing a particular song as an instrumental, now you might only need to play a simple bass line. There needn't be a chord or even a note on every beat in every measure. Instead of a flurry of eighths or 16ths, try picking or strumming some whole notes and letting them ring, underscoring the vocal line. The melody of your vocal will stand out, much as it would if you were mixing it in a studio recording.

The guitar part can also function as a rhythm track underneath the vocal. You can dampen (palm mute) the bass strings as you play, creating a steady foundation that complements the melody that you are singing. A simple swing, rock, or Latin beat can go a long way toward creating a powerful feeling underneath the vocal line. You might find it surprising and enjoyable how little you need to play while accompanying yourself. Taking that pressure off yourself to fill every space can also help you relax and stay present with your audience.

4 PRACTICE SLOWLY

Start with a fairly simple tune. Eventually you may want to play a more complex guitar part, like an intricate fingerpicking pattern, while singing. Whatever the case, get that guitar part into your bones such that it feels almost unconscious to play it. The best way to achieve this is through regular repetition, until the pattern becomes ingrained in your fingers.

The vocal part should be the focus, with the guitar serving to enhance the lyrics and the message. Let the guitar serve the song rather than draw attention to itself.

Set yourself a regular time of day when you practice your guitar part slowly and accurately, gradually bringing it up to tempo. Short, daily sessions are much more effective at creating muscle memory than longer sittings once or twice a week. Again, do all this separately from singing. Once you have the guitar part under your fingers, then you can add the next layer of complexity—your vocal part.

5 FOCUS ON INTERPLAY

After you've found the best key for your voice and feel confident with your guitar part, look for opportunities to create interplay between your voice and guitar. Play more softly underneath certain vocal passages and build in volume underneath others. Shifting from soft fingerpicking on a verse to full strumming for the chorus is a good example of how you can create dynamic variety and interest in a song. You might also try keeping a steady tempo on your guitar, while singing a bit ahead or behind the beat, for rhythmic variety and expressiveness.

If you follow these steps, you may discover that rather than being overwhelmed by doing two things at once, your guitar playing flows quite easily. Putting your focus on accompanying your voice and delivering the message of the song can help take some of the pressure off of you to hit all the notes perfectly. Whether you are a solo performer or working with a full band, singing and playing at the same time can take you to new areas of creativity in your playing and widen the range of musical colors you bring to your performances. AG

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David Hamburger



COURTESY OF DAVID HAMBURGER

Step Up to the Barre

Play any major, minor, or seventh chord in any key with barre chords

BY DAVID HAMBURGER

If you've been strumming and playing songs using chords like G, C, D, E, and A, with maybe a couple of minor or sevenths thrown in, you've been playing open chords—those that use one or more open strings. Barre chords have no open strings; you play them by placing your index finger across five or six strings at once (barring them) and putting down some combination of your remaining fingers on the frets above your index finger.

It can be a challenge at first to get barre chords to sound as clear and clean as their open counterparts. But the payoff is that, unlike open chords, you can use each barre-chord shape to play 12 different chords—just by moving the shape up or down the neck. Learning barre shapes thus gives you access to the kind of out-of-the-way chords you may have run into in songbooks, with names like Bm, A♭7, F♯, etc. In this lesson you'll learn a handful of essential chord shapes and use them to play the swing favorite "After You've Gone."

BASIC BARRES

Your first barre chord is G major, as shown in **Example 1**. Your first finger covers all six strings at the third fret; your second is on fret 4 of string 3; your fourth, fret 5 of string 4; and your third, fret 5 of string 5. To see where this chord comes from, play an open-position E chord and look at where your fingers are relative to the nut of the guitar. Now place a capo at the third fret and play the same E chord above the capo. Remove the capo and play the G barre chord. Look familiar? The G barre chord is just an E shape capoed up three frets, with your first finger serving as the capo.

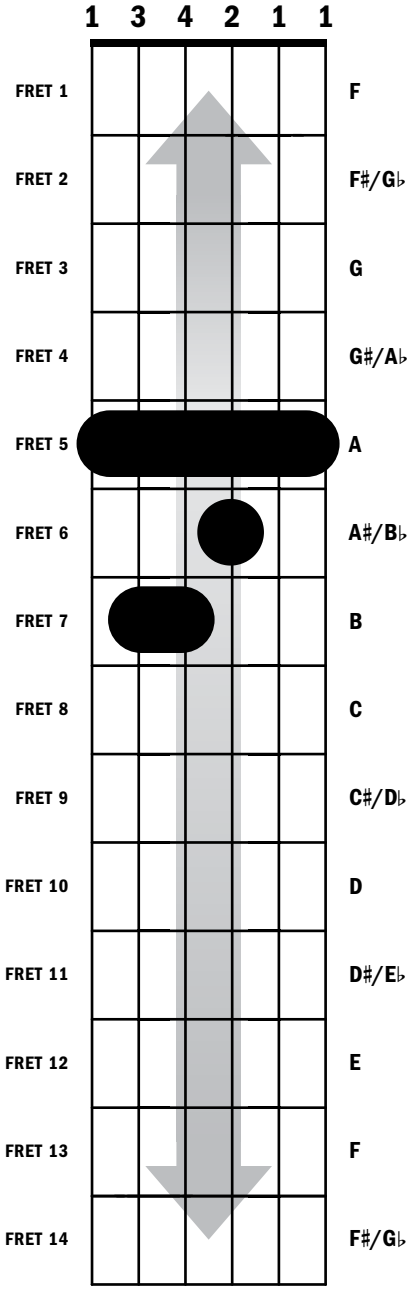
The same logic leads to your next two barre chords. If you lift your second finger from the G barre chord, you get a Gm barre. If you play an open-position Em chord with the capo at the third fret, you'll see the similarity between the capoed Em and the Gm barre chord. Starting from the G chord again, remove your fourth finger and you get a G7 chord. Compare this to an open E7 chord capoed at the third fret.

These G, Gm, and G7 chords all have their root on the sixth string. The root is the foundational note of a chord that gives the chord its name. The lowest note of each of these G chords is the third-fret G on string 6. If you move any of these three shapes up or down the neck, it will become a different chord. That new chord's name will be determined by the root, but its quality will remain the same—that is, whether it's a major, minor, or seventh chord. For example, if you slide G7 up two frets, you get A7. It's still a seventh chord, but

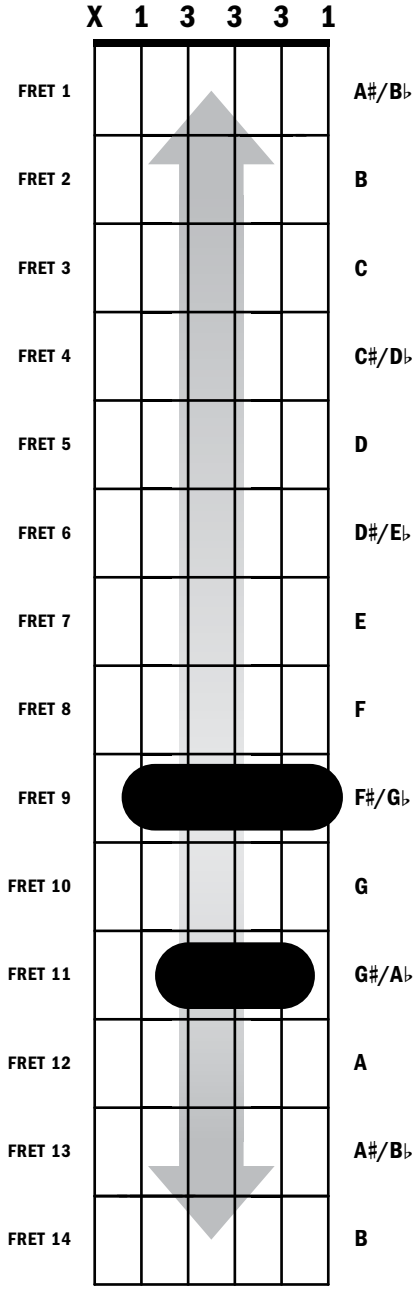




Sixth-String-Root Barres



Fifth-String-Root Barres



the bottom note—fret 5, string 6—is A. If you slide Gm up to the eighth fret, you get a Cm chord, because the sixth-string note is C. Move a G chord down one fret for an F♯/G♭ chord, as the second fret of the sixth string is an F♯/G♭.

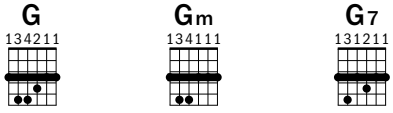
FIFTH-STRING-ROOT BARRE CHORDS

There is a second distinct family of barre chords for which you only need to barre across the top five strings, as depicted at the third fret in **Example 2**. If you capo at the third fret and play A, Am, and the two-finger A7 chord, you can see where these barre-chord shapes come from. To play the C chord, bar strings 4–2 with your third finger and strings 5–1 with your first. If that feels awkward, you can omit the highest note, on string 1, and only play the fifth-fret note with your first finger. I would encourage you to also try the alternative fingering, with your second, third, and fourth fingers on strings 4, 3, and 2, respectively, rather than a third-finger barre covering those interior notes.

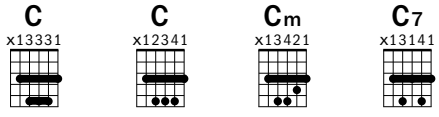
The C, Cm, and C7 chords all have their root on the fifth string, and so are called fifth-string-root chords, to distinguish them from the first three chords we learned, whose roots were on the sixth string. As you move each fifth-string-root chord up or down the neck, it will take its name from whatever note you are playing on the fifth string. For example, a C chord moved up to the sixth fret is D♯/E♭, a Cm chord shifted down to the second fret is Bm, and a C7 transferred to the ninth fret is an F♯7/G♭7.

Now let's play a song. The swing standard "After You've Gone," composed by Henry Creamer and Turner Layton in 1918, has been performed by numerous musicians, including Charlie Parker, Riders in the Sky, and, most notably to guitarists, Django Reinhardt and the Quintet of the Hot Club of France. The arrangement here uses all six of these shapes, and playing through it should give you a good idea of the whole new world barre chords can open up. AG

Example 1
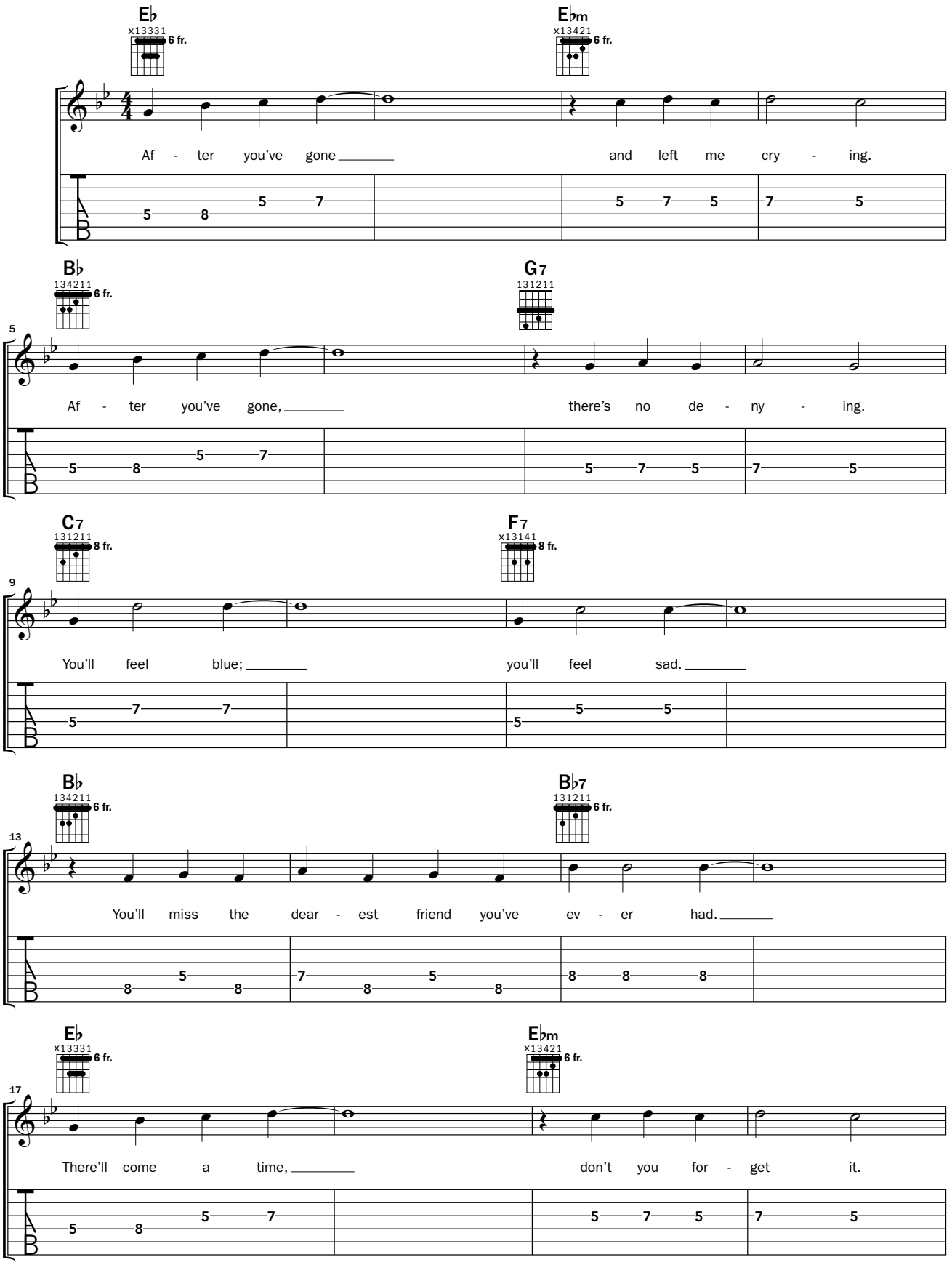


Example 2
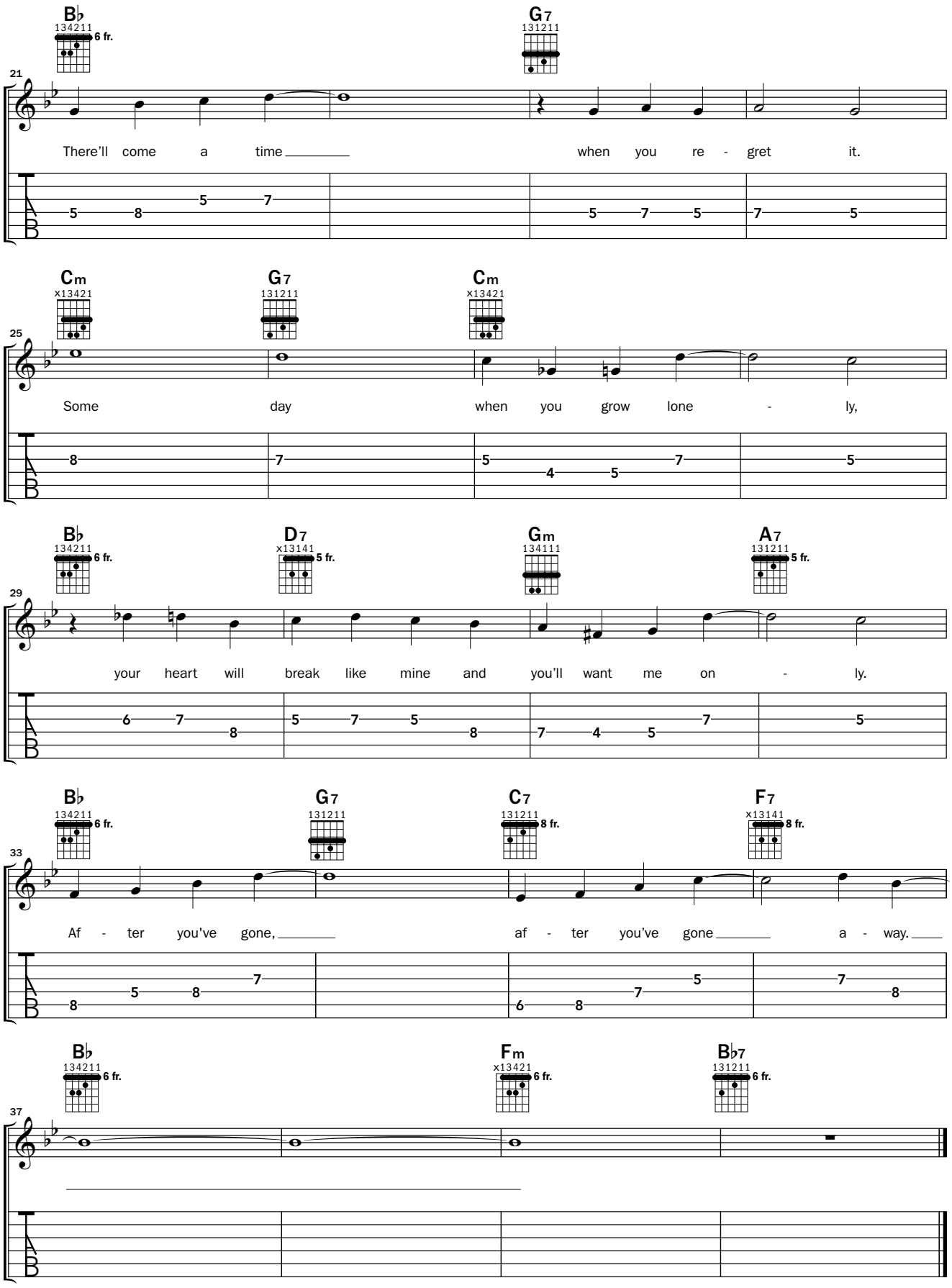


AFTER YOU'VE GONE

BY HENRY CREAMER AND TURNER LAYTON



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B♭ 134211 6 fr.
G7 131211
21
There'll come a time when you re - gret it.
Cm x13421
G7 131211
Cm x13421
25
Some day when you grow lone - ly,
B♭ 134211 6 fr.
D7 x13141 5 fr.
Gm 134111
A7 131211 5 fr.
29
your heart will break like mine and you'll want me on - ly.
B♭ 134211 6 fr.
G7 131211
C7 131211 8 fr.
F7 x13141 8 fr.
33
Af - ter you've gone, af - ter you've gone a - way.
B♭ 134211 6 fr.
Fm x13421 6 fr.
B♭7 131211 6 fr.
37

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Going Through Changes

Learn to visualize and connect chord shapes all around the neck and use them for melodic improvisation

BY JANE MILLER

Many of us learn to improvise by memorizing a couple of scale patterns and then matching them to the key that we're in. On a good day, melodies are born, blues are expressed, licks are found. On a not-so-good day, when it's your turn to solo the song is not in the right key—not only that, it changes keys every two or four bars, and by the time you figure out how to chase that around, it's not your turn anymore. Being able to visualize the chords all over the neck as they happen is a great foundation for building melodic lines that make real use of the chords without being limited to one or two scales.

Visualization is a powerful tool that many of us already use every day. In your earliest days of learning to play the guitar, you might have associated chord forms with geometric shapes, likening open D to a triangle, A to a straight line, and so on. In this lesson, you'll make use of those mental pictures and add some others that will have you improvising with the ease of everyday conversation.
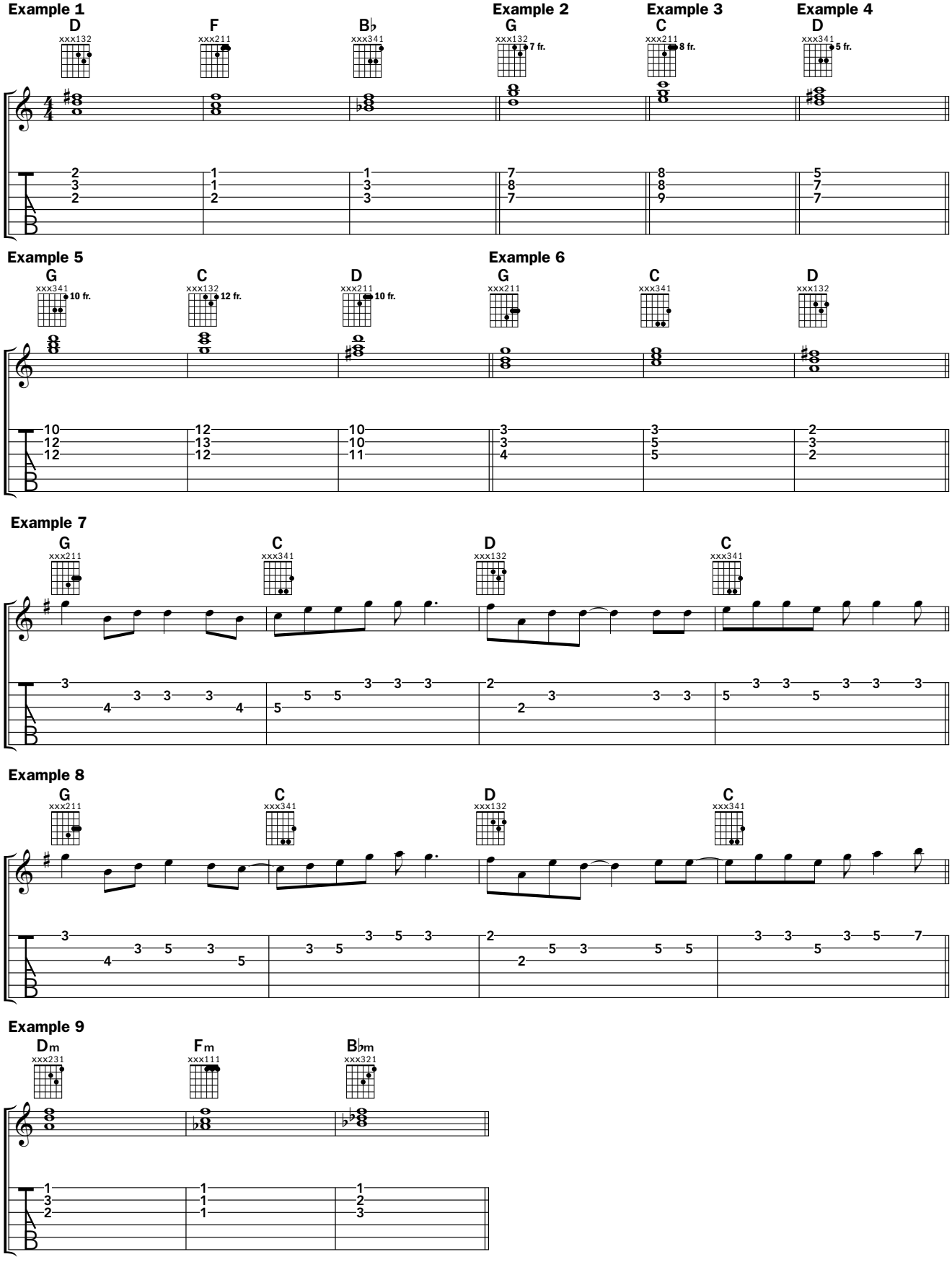
THREE VIEWS OF A I–IV–V PROGRESSION

In conversation, as in soloing, you are at your best when you really know the topic and can form—and convey—ideas as you speak. Musically, the topic is the chord progression over which you are soloing.

Begin with **Example 1**, which shows a trio of major triads on the top three strings. Study these shapes and their positions. It helps to be aware of which chord tone is on the first string; for example, on the D chord, that note is F♯, or the major third. Noticing this will help you make alterations when needed and transpose quickly to other keys. The note names might change, but the way they function in the chords does not.

Now move the D shape up to the seventh fret, making it a G chord, as shown in **Example 2**. That note on the first string is now B—sure enough, the third of the chord. Look at the F shape from Ex. 1. The root of the chord, F, is on the first string. Shift it up to the eighth-fret C, to make a C major triad (**Example 3**). You're two-thirds of the way to a I–IV–V progression. Go back to Ex. 1 and grab that B♭ triad shape. Up a whole step is C and another whole step is D, as shown in **Example 4**. You now have a I–IV–V chord progression in the key of G (G–C–D).

What if you had chosen a different major triad to begin this visual exercise? You could keep it in the key of G but start by grabbing the


Example 1
D
xxx132
F
xxx211
B♭
xxx341
Example 2
G
xxx132
7 fr.
Example 3
C
xxx211
8 fr.
Example 4
D
xxx341
5 fr.
Example 5
G
xxx341
10 fr.
C
xxx132
12 fr.
D
xxx211
10 fr.
Example 6
G
xxx211
C
xxx341
D
xxx132
Example 7
G
xxx211
C
xxx341
D
xxx132
C
xxx341
Example 8
G
xxx211
C
xxx341
D
xxx132
C
xxx341
Example 9
Dm
xxx231
Fm
xxx111
B♭m
xxx321

B♭ shape first this time. That puts a G triad on the tenth fret. Now find the other nearby triad shapes to add a C chord at the 12th fret and a D at the tenth (**Example 5**).

A third way to do the progression is to begin with the F-chord shape and move it up a whole step to become G at the third fret. The nearest C is the B♭ shape moved up a whole step, and the closest D is the second-fret shape as shown in Ex. 1, creating a I–IV–V in the lower part of the neck, as depicted in **Example 6**.

MAKING THE CHANGES

Blocking out chords like this is the first step toward being able to visualize changes as an improviser. **Example 7** shows how you might play a line around the progression in G using only the notes found in the shapes from Ex. 6. Once you've gone horizontal in this way—that is, melodic, as opposed to harmonic—you can start to visualize lines around the shapes that connect to one another. Use whatever resources you have for this: your ears, your knowledge of scales and patterns, and your innate creativity.

Example 8 shows a melodic line derived from the shapes you've used, with notes added to make smooth connections from one chord to the next. Pay careful attention to the positions shown and make sure you really see which shape the line is based on.

When you encounter minor chords in songs, you can find the three note forms to use by adjusting major triads. **Example 9** shows what minor triads look like when you flatten the third from their parallel major triads (those sharing the same root notes).

THE SHAPE OF THINGS

My composition "The Shape of Things" shows how you can block out the movable three-string forms and create lines around them. A sample improvised line is shown below the chord shapes. Think of the chord diagrams shown as places to start; the triads can be a shortcut to use when encountering their associated seventh chords.

The first chord is Gm7 (G B♭ D F). Use a Gm shape in third position and the melodic line you play can include the flatted seventh (F), as seen on beat 3 of measure 1 and elsewhere, implying a Gm7 chord (G B♭ D F).

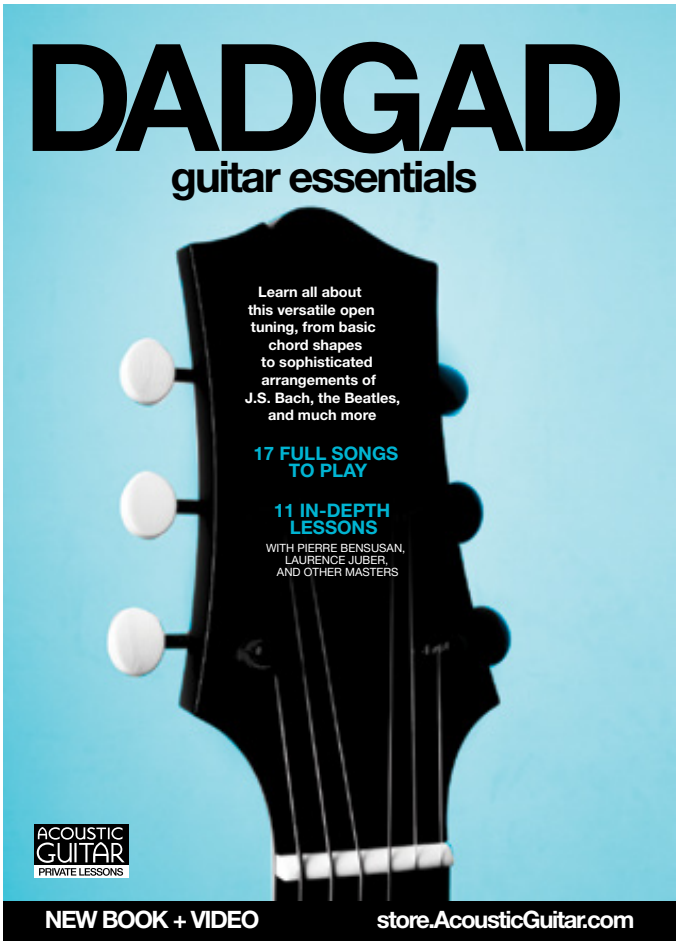
Because the line ascends its way up to the eighth position in measure 7, it makes good sense to choose the C major triad shown at fret 8 to use as a visual aid for an Am7 chord. That's because the top three notes of Am7 (A C E G) are identical to those in a C chord (C E G).

Similarly, in measure 13, the F major triad (F A C) at the fifth fret works with the Dm7 chord (D F A C), which is also spelled out melodically, starting on a C, in the first four notes of that bar. B♭maj7 (B♭ D F A) contains a D minor triad (D F A), so bar 18 makes good use of that trick. In the final two bars, the melody comes in for a landing back at the Gm7 chord, once again in third position.

Have fun with it, and let your imagination discover new lines based on the shapes as you visualize them around the neck.

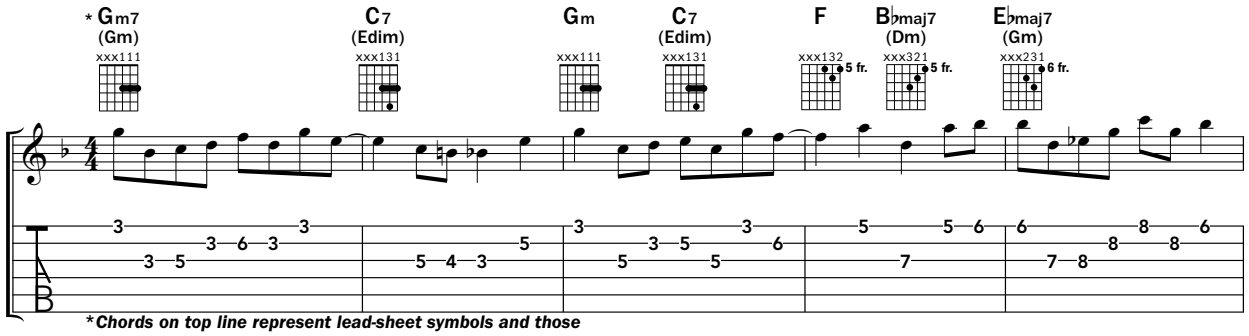
Jane Miller, author of Triads for the Improvising Guitarist *(Berklee Press/Hal Leonard), is a professor of guitar at Berklee College of Music in Boston, as well as a composer and arranger. janemillergroup.com*



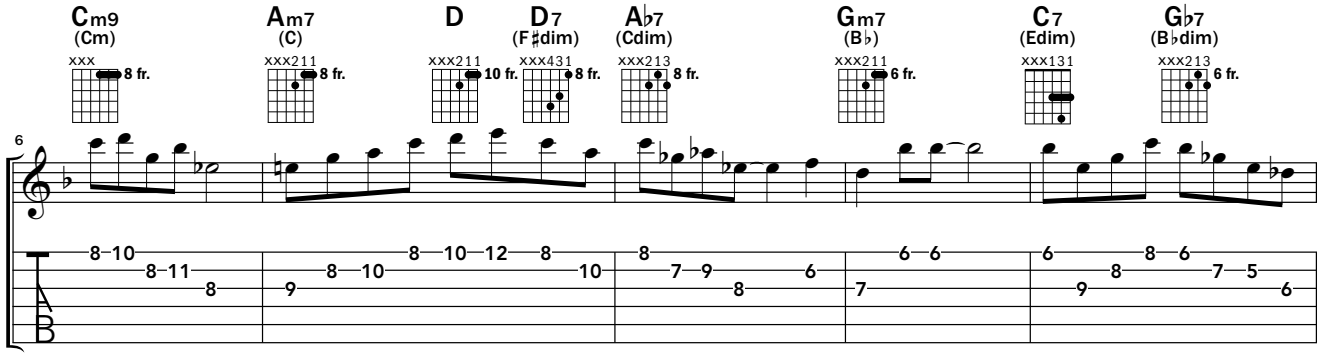


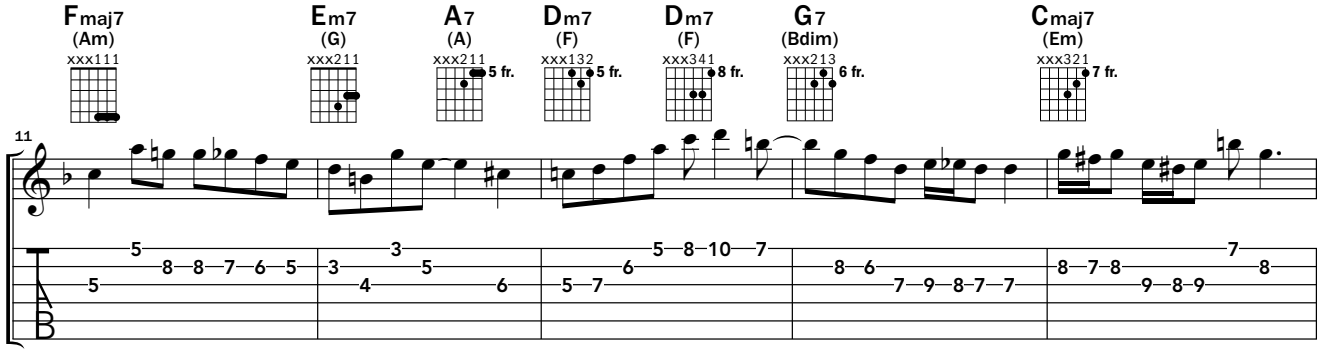
THE SHAPE OF THINGS

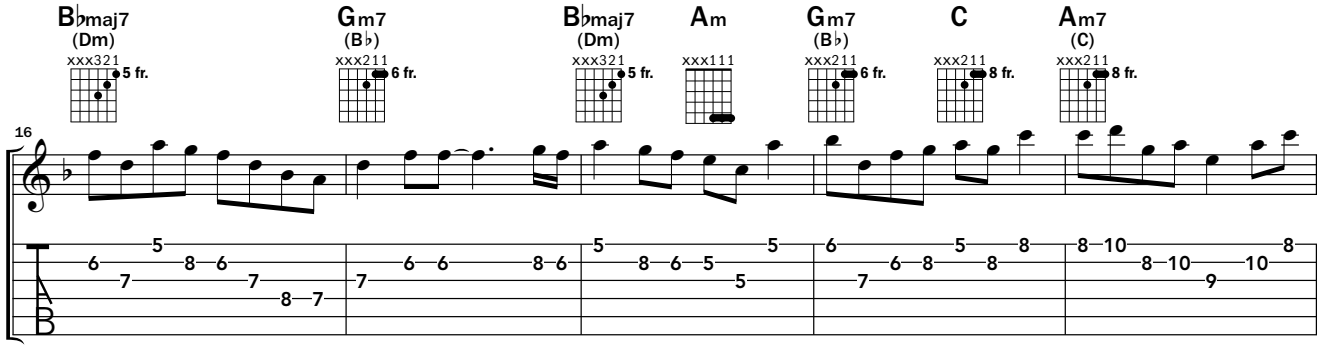
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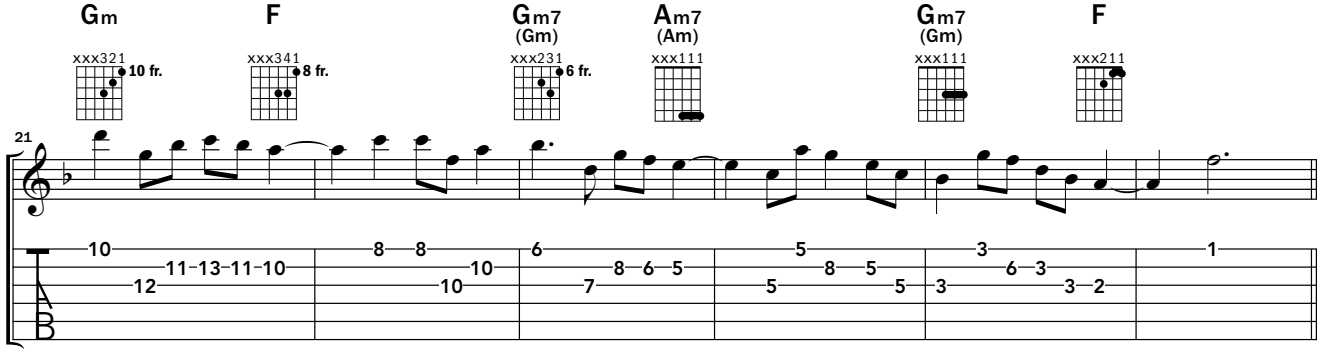


*Chords on top line represent lead-sheet symbols and those in parentheses below correspond to shapes shown in frames.









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Tune into Double Dropped D

Explore an accessible alternate tuning used in classic songs from Neil Young and many others

BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS

Neil Young uses double-dropped-D tuning in songs like "Ohio" and "Cinnamon Girl."



JOELBERNSTEIN

If you've ventured into dropped-D tuning on guitar, a great next step into the world of alternate tunings is double dropped D, where you not only lower your sixth string from E to D (as in dropped D) but do the same with your first string. Those two dropped strings open up enticing new possibilities on both the low and high ends of the guitar, while also leaving the four middle strings alone, so that much of what you know on the fingerboard in standard tuning still works.

For evidence of the potential of double dropped D—also called D modal by the best-known employer of this tuning, Neil Young—look no further than songs by Led Zeppelin, the Doobie Brothers, Fleetwood Mac, Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, Elliott Smith, Michael Hedges, and of course Mr. Young himself. (See "Double-Dropped-D Song Sampler.") As these artists demonstrate, the tuning lends itself to both fingerstyle and flatpick playing.

In this workout we'll get oriented in double dropped D by looking at common chord shapes, and then we'll check out examples inspired by classic songs.

WEEK ONE

First, tune those first and sixth strings down a whole step, so your open string pitches are D A D G B D. In double dropped D you are close to some other common tunings. If you lower the fifth string a whole step, you'll have open G (D G D G B D); drop the second string a step and you're in DADGAD.

In double dropped D, you've got a few key assets on your open strings. You have D strings in three octaves, unlocking some serious drone potential. You also have a no-fretting D power chord (D–A–D) on the bottom three strings, which means you can also play one-finger power chords on those same strings anywhere on the neck. And you've got a G major chord on the top four open strings.

First, check out the array of D shapes in **Example 1**. Not surprisingly given all the D notes in the tuning, lots of strong D voicings are available. The two-finger D5 is a core shape in double dropped D—it's all roots (D) and fifths (A), with no third, so the chord is neither major nor minor.

Fret the first string as you would in a standard tuning D and you get Dsus2—another chord lacking a third. Moving along the row of chord grids, check out the Dm and D7. Then head up the neck for D major and minor voicings at the sixth/seventh frets and at the tenth/11th. Because of the tuning, you can leave the low strings and the high string open for a lush blend of fretted and open strings.

Now play through some other chords in **Example 2**. G major requires very little fretting. To get a low root, just include the sixth string, fifth fret. As shown, you can hold down both low strings at the fifth fret or just fret the sixth string and mute the fifth string by leaning your fretting finger against it. On the top end, you can leave the first string open or fret the G note at the fifth fret.

Bm is a nice, easy shape with no barre. With the C, if you hold the usual shape but include the open first string, you get a

Beginners' Tip #1

On the A major chord shapes, notice the cluster harmony on the second and first strings, which ring a half step apart.

Beginners' Tip #2

In the Week Two examples, let the strings ring as long as possible to maximize the drone.

sweet-sounding Cadd9. You can also find Cadd9 at the ninth fret; this is a useful shape you can move around the neck to play F6 and B♭, as shown, as well as other chords.

In **Example 3** you'll find a selection of A chords. The first-string D note is the fourth of an A chord, so you can easily play sparkly cluster voicings that add the fourth to A, A7, Am, and Am7. In an E chord, the first-string D is the flatted seventh, so including the open first string gives you the E7 and Em7 shapes shown (some of these shapes also have a flatted seventh on the open fourth string). The final chord shape, Gm7, is the barre version of the second Em7—a movable shape that's handy to know.

WEEK TWO

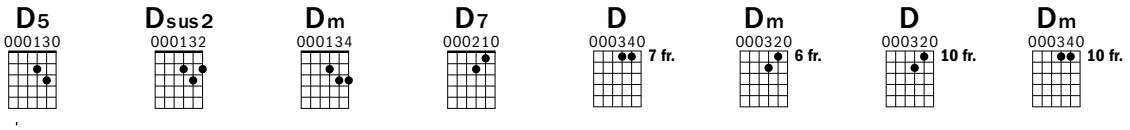
This week, dig into a few examples inspired by songs that make the most of the big drone sounds of double dropped D.

Bob Dylan's early story song "Ballad of Hollis Brown" chugs along on a D5 for its entire five minutes. Capo at the first fret to be in tune with the track on *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. In **Example 4**, hold the D5 shape with your first and third fingers, and fret the C and F notes on the fifth and fourth strings with your second finger. This simple pattern, with small variations, continues through the whole song.

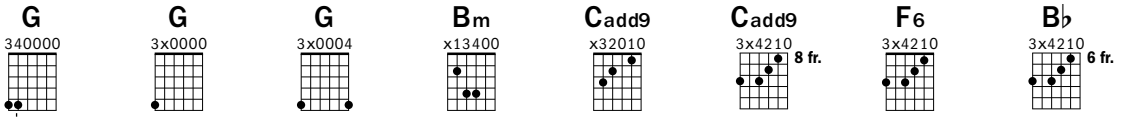
WEEK 1

Tuning: D A D G B D

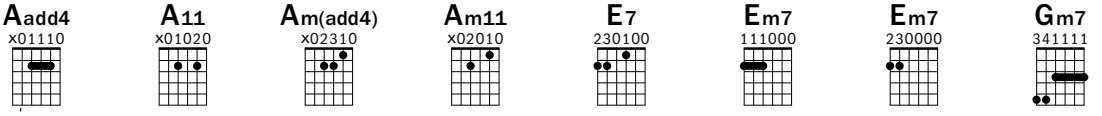
Example 1



Example 2

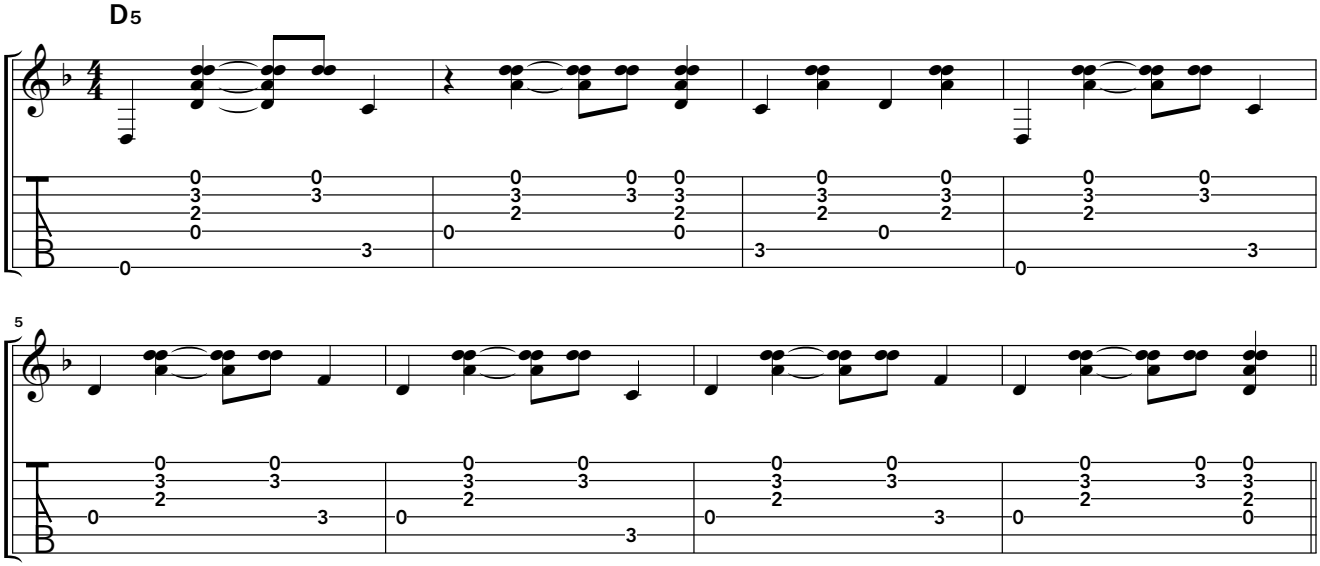


Example 3



WEEK 2

Example 4
Capo I



Another song in double dropped D that's heavy on the drones is Led Zeppelin's "Going to California." Multiple guitars and mandolin fill out the original track, but the foundation is Jimmy Page's double dropped D fingerpicking. Check out the first four bars in **Example 5:** nothing but D notes on four strings in a hypnotic pattern fingerpicked over an alternating bass.

Continuing in measure 5, switch to a G at the fifth fret and add a little melody on the top two strings. Notice how seamlessly you can slide up to the D shape in measure 9 and use the add4 colors. The tuning lends itself beautifully to sus4 and add4 embellishments.

WEEK THREE

No dive into double dropped D would be complete without some Neil Young grooves, so those are the focus this week. **Example 6** is based on the main riff in "Ohio." The guitar part uses a D5 that leaves the tonality open, but the vocal melody clearly establishes the key of D minor. Hammer on to the third string of the D5 shape in bars 1 and 3. Mark the changes to F and C mostly with the bass notes. With all three chords, play the open third string as a transition to the next chord.

In the chorus of "Ohio," the chords move to Gm7 and Cadd9, as shown in **Example 7**. The dropped first string brings a special flavor to both chords—adding the flatted seventh atop the Gm7 and the ninth to the C.

The next example comes from the rocking "Cinnamon Girl." In **Example 8,** start with a slide from C to D chords on the treble strings, then head to the low strings for the answering line in bar 2 that ends with an F to G power chord move. Young typically plays this one on a cranked-up electric guitar, but it has plenty of drive on acoustic as well.

While all the examples so far have been in the key of D, either major or minor, double dropped D can sound great in other keys. A case in point is **Example 9,** based on Young's wistful "One of These Days," in the key of A. On the A chord, the dropped first string contributes the ringing add4. In bar 2, play the same minor seventh shape used in Ex. 7, but moved down a fret for F♯m7. For D, use a Dsus2.

WEEK FOUR

To round out the lesson, let's touch on a couple more classic songs. One of the quintessential guitar parts in double dropped D comes from the Doobie Brothers—specifically their resident fingerpicker and all-around guitar ace Patrick Simmons. That would be "Black Water," which is built around a Am11-to-D5 figure with a cool bass line.

In **Example 10,** play an A♯-to-B hammer-on on the fifth string leading to the Am11,

DOUBLE-DROPPED-D SONG SAMPLER

For inspiration, check out these fine examples of double-dropped-D guitar—used to accompany vocals and for a few instrumentals (Nick Drake, Andrew York, Eric Johnson).



Led Zeppelin
"Going to California"



Doobie Brothers
"Black Water"



Neil Young
"Cinnamon Girl"



Bob Dylan "Ballad of
Hollis Brown" (capo 1)



Joni Mitchell
"Free Man in Paris"



Fleetwood Mac
"The Chain" (capo 2)



Nick Drake
"Bryter Layter" (capo 3)



Andrew York
"Sunburst"



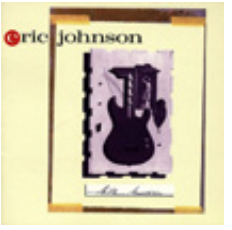
Michael Hedges
"Running Blind"



Elliott Smith
"Satellite"
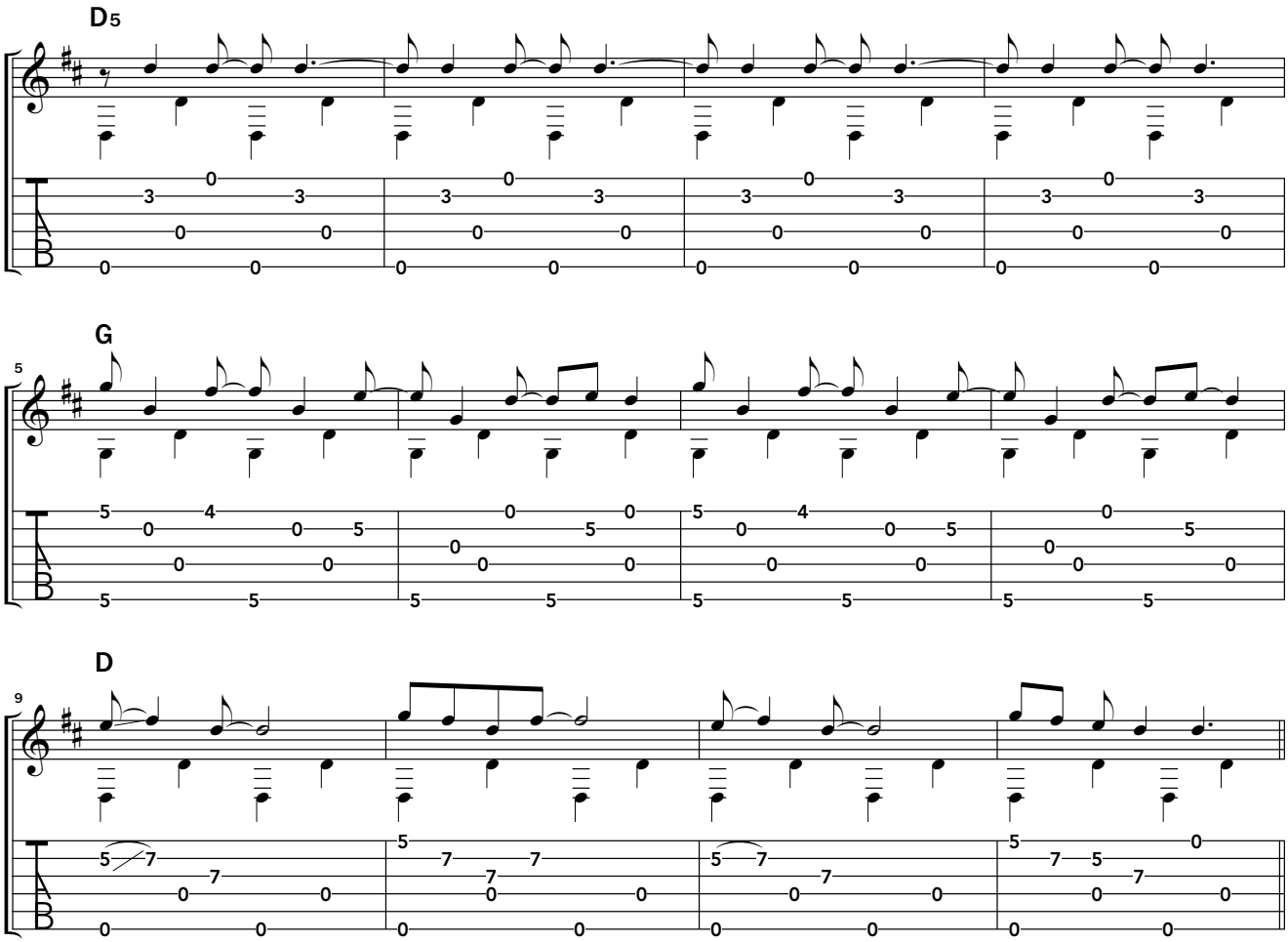


Bruce Cockburn
"Let the Bad Air Out"



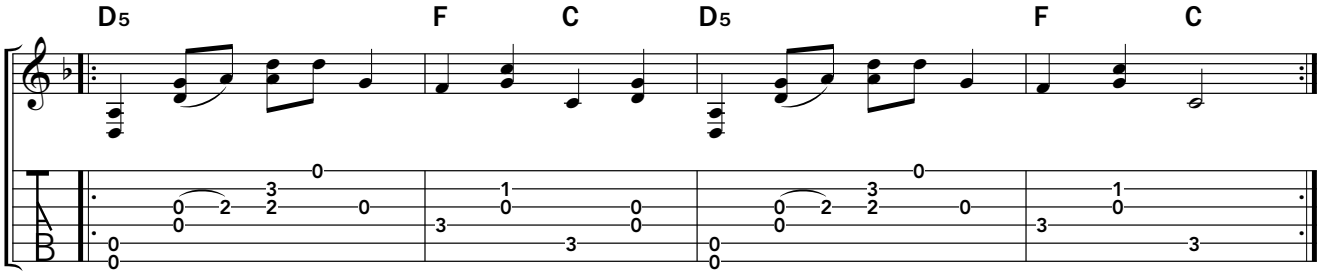
Eric Johnson
"Song for George"

Example 5

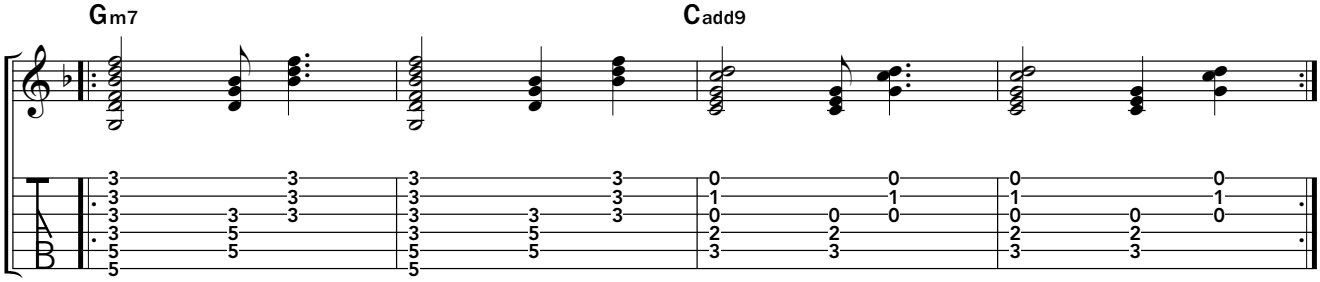


WEEK 3

Example 6



Example 7



with that D ringing on the first string. Then play a quick slide up to the F♯ on the sixth string before landing on the D5.

The final example comes from my arrangement of Simon and Garfunkel's "The Boxer." For many years I puzzled over how to create the gorgeous cascading guitar intro, played by session guitarist Fred Carter Jr. The secret, I eventually learned, is dropping the first string a step—and then I further discovered that dropping the sixth string as well sweetens the bass lines. (Note that Carter used an open tuning with the sixth string *raised* up to the root, and he also played a baby guitar tuned up a third overall so it sounded in B. I get close to his setup by using double dropped D with a capo at the fourth fret.)

In **Example 11**, get your fretting fingers in place before playing the first two measures: first, second, and fourth fingers on strings 3, 4, and 5, respectively. Then, fingerpick the backwards roll, lifting your second finger on the last two beats of bar 2 to play the third string open.

Bar 5 onward shows a sample picking pattern to play under the verse. You're using G shapes, so the low D on the sixth string gives you an alternate bass note under the G chord, as well as a low root when you go to a D chord.

Later in my arrangement (available on YouTube), the tuning facilitates adding an instrumental section, too, based on the pedal steel and piccolo trumpet interlude on the original recording.

Take some of the ideas in these examples and try applying them to songs in your own repertoire—or try writing something new in double dropped D. Playing in the key of D is a good place to start, but also consider other keys that might include a D chord, such as G, A, B minor, or E minor. As with any alternate tuning, experiment with leaving strings open that you'd normally be fretting, and see what kinds of sounds you discover. AG

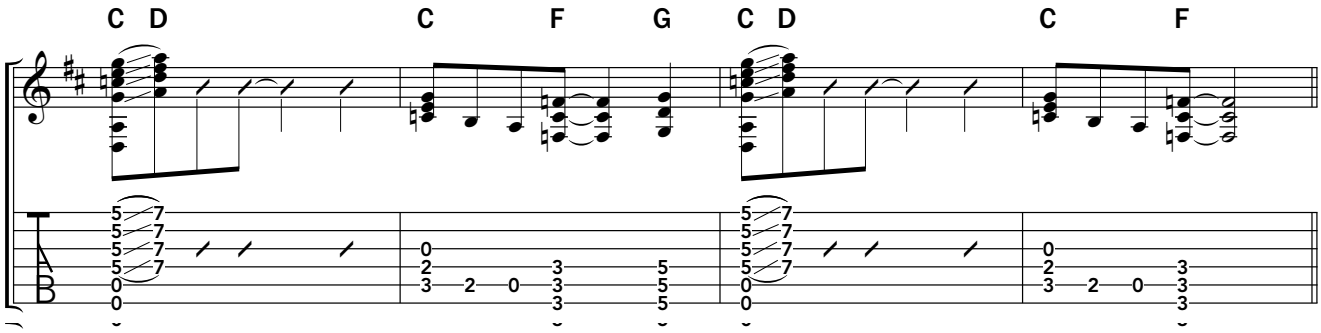
Beginners' Tip #3

In rocking songs like "Ohio" and "Cinnamon Girl," play percussively and use palm muting to bring out the drive.

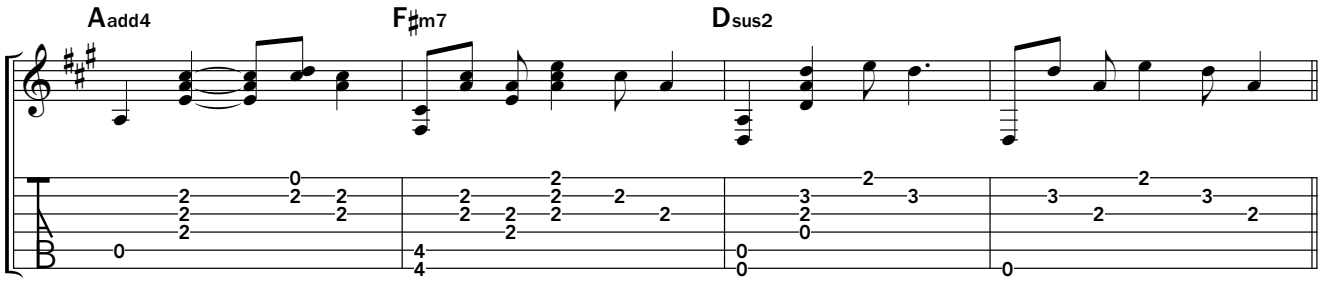
Beginners' Tip #4

If you use a capo at the fifth fret with Example 11, you'll sound in the key of C—a common key for "The Boxer."

Example 8

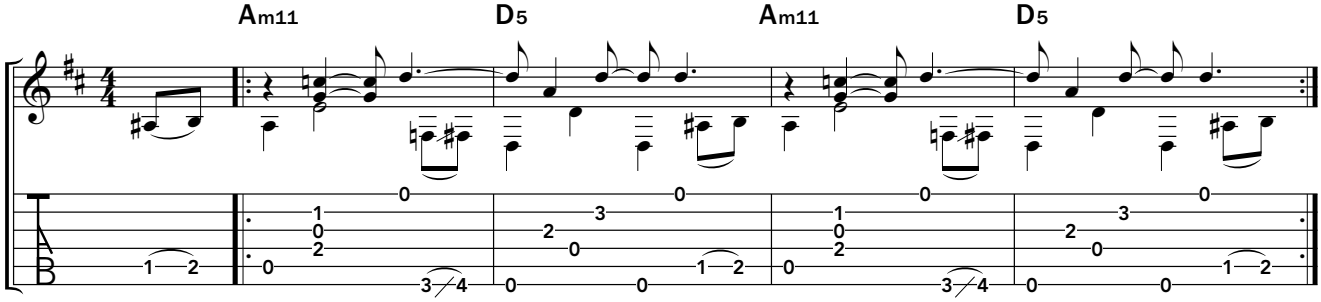


Example 9
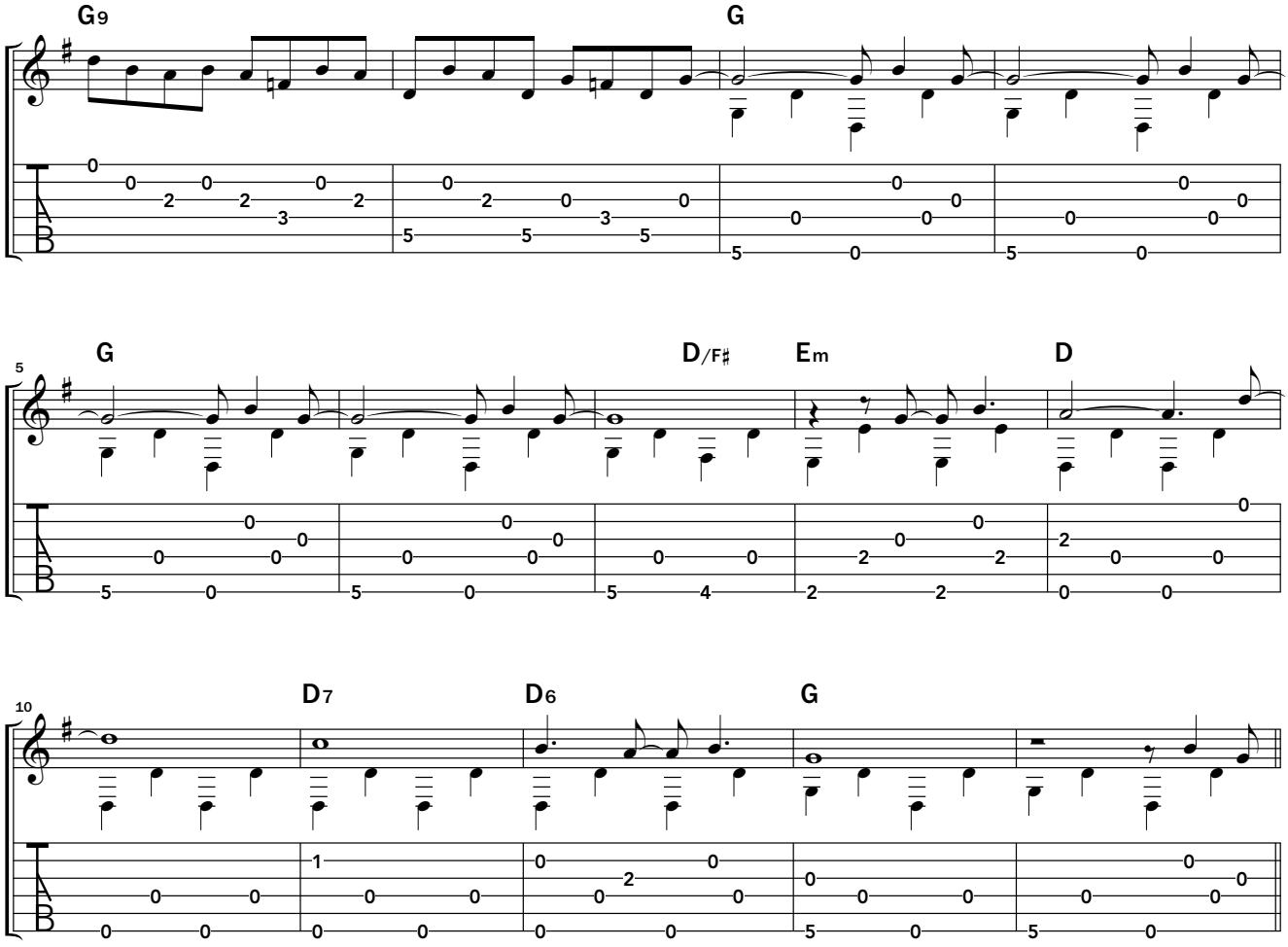


WEEK 4

Example 10

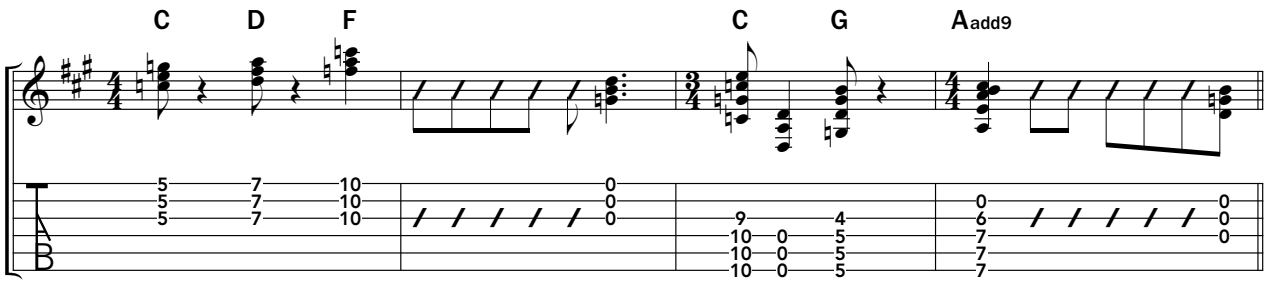


Example 11
Capo IV



TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Joni Mitchell's "Free Man in Paris" is a great example of using double dropped D outside the box of D drones, working both the treble and bass sides of the fingerboard. Start with C, D, and F triads on the top strings and then shift to the low strings for C and G on the way to settling into the key of A for the verse. Strum open strings in the transitions between chord shapes.



ACOUSTIC CLASSIC

READERS' PICK

The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald

A tragic shipwreck inspires an unlikely folk-pop hit

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

Gordon Lightfoot



WIKIMEDIA/ARNIELEE

Gordon Lightfoot's "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" (1976) might just be the most unlikely song to ever peak at No. 2 on the Top 40. Not only is this Grammy-nominated ballad quite long, clocking in at more than six minutes, its subject matter is the 1975 sinking of an ore carrier on Lake Superior that resulted in the deaths of all 29 crew members aboard.

Lightfoot's lyrics describe the tragedy in sharp detail and with reverence for the historical facts. The late Canadian singer-songwriter, who died last May at 84, was so concerned with accuracy that he updated the lyrics in 2010 after it was revealed that the wreck was caused by treacherous waves, rather than human error, as originally thought. He revised the third line of verse 4 to say "At 7 pm, it grew dark, it was then he said," and in the first line of verse 7, he changed "musty" to "rustic."

"The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald," with its lilting feel, is in 6/8 time—or six eighth notes per measure. If you are not yet familiar with this meter, it's best counted "1 2 3, 4 5 6," as Lightfoot does audibly at the beginnings of concert performances on YouTube.

Lightfoot recorded the song on a 12-string—specifically, a Gibson B-45-12—but it will work just as well on a six-string. This notation (p. 50) shows a strumming pattern similar to the one that Lightfoot plays on the intro of the original studio recording, with small variations in the rhythms throughout. A good way to learn the pattern would be first to strum downstrokes only on the beats, and then to add occasional upstrokes between them. For those who also play lead guitar, I've also included the memorable electric lead line heard in the intro. On acoustic guitar, you may want to substitute slides for some of the bends.

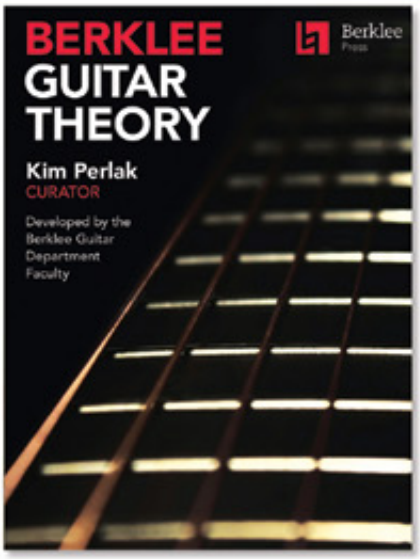
When it comes to the fretting hand, this arrangement of "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" is pretty simple—just five open shapes in the key of A major (sounding as B, due to a second-fret capo). Instead of an A chord (A C♯ E), there's an Asus2, a type of suspended triad in which the third (C♯) is replaced with the second (B). Then there's the G6/A, or a G6 chord (G B D E) with an A as the lowest note, used only in the intro/interlude section. Chords like these are easy to fret and add beautiful colors and textures. AG

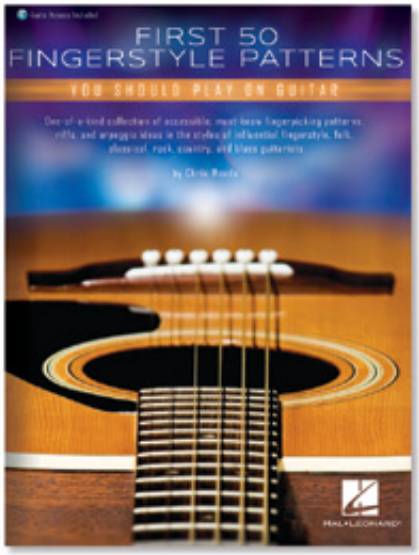
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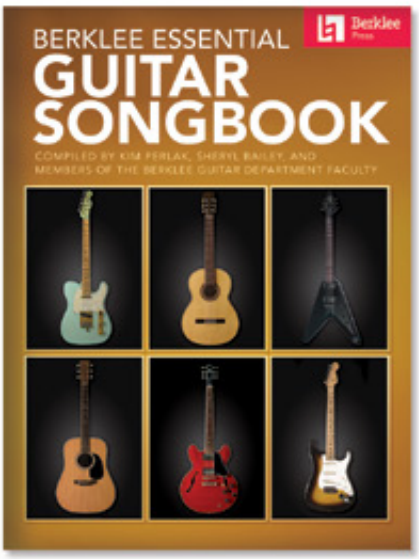
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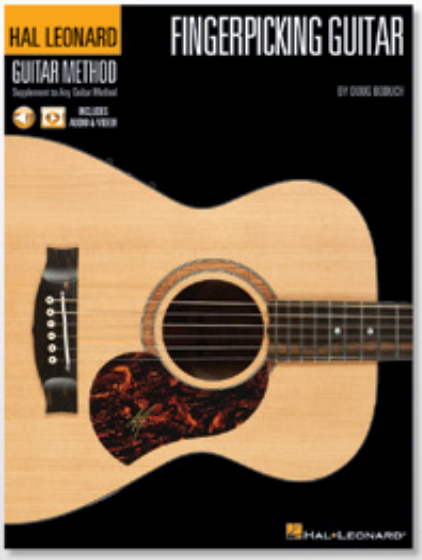
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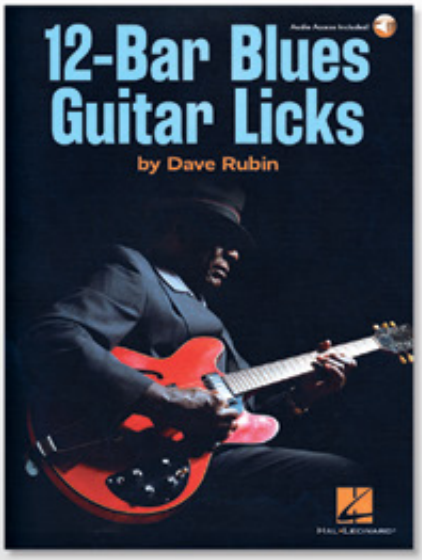




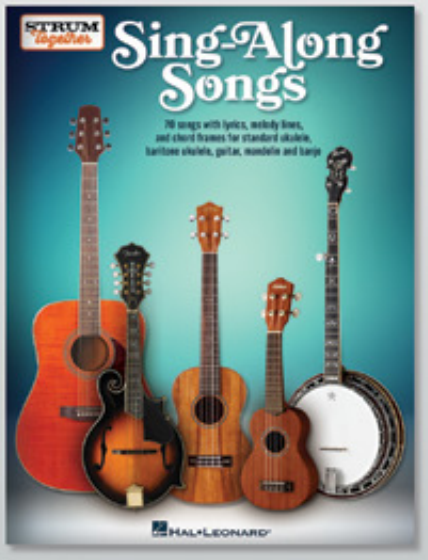














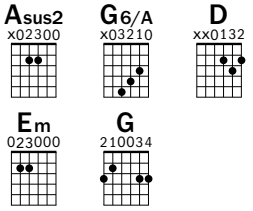
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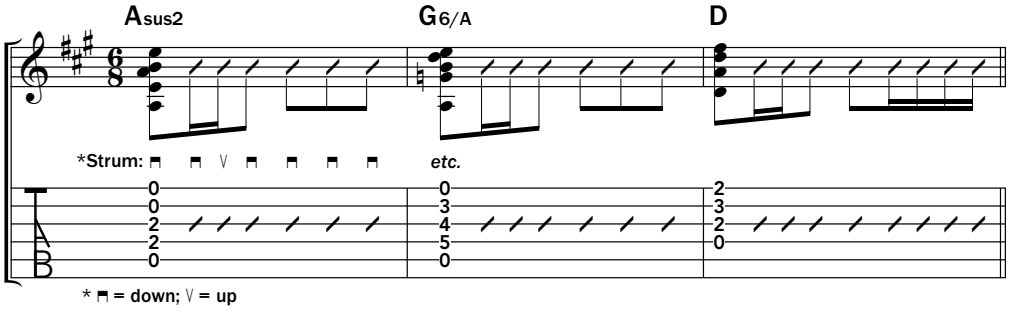
THE WRECK OF THE EDMUND FITZGERALD

WORDS AND MUSIC BY GORDON LIGHTFOOT

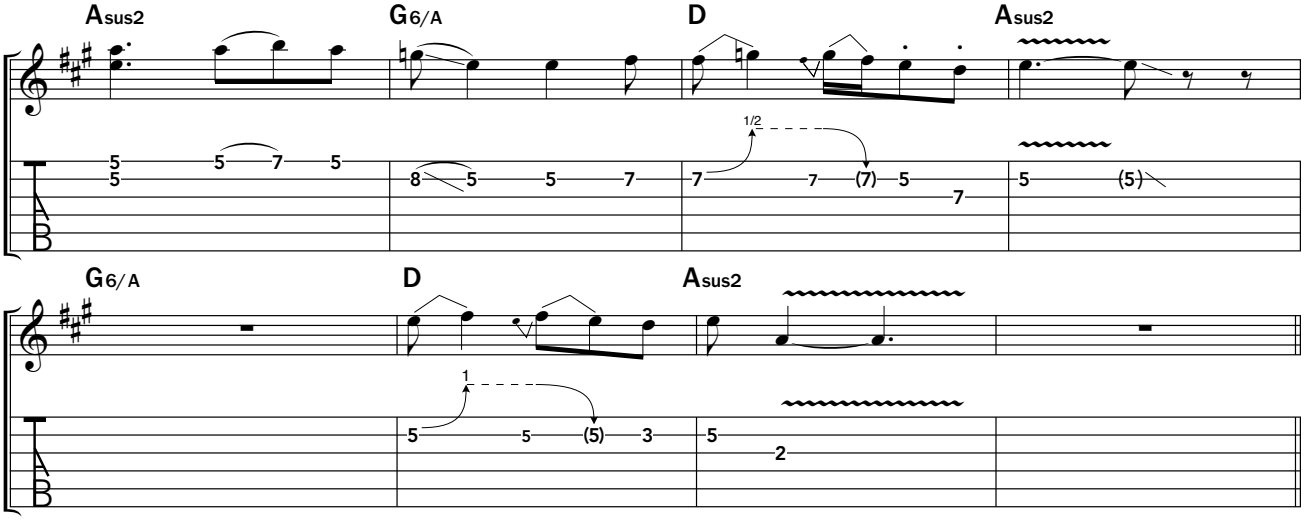
Chords, Capo II



Basic Strumming Pattern



Intro (Electric Guitar)



Intro

| **Asus2** | **G6/A** | **D** | **Asus2** |

| **G6/A** | **D** | **Asus2** | 𝄎 ||

Asus2 **Em**
1. The legend lives on from the Chippewa on down

G **D** **Asus2**
Of the big lake they called Gitche Gumee

Em
The lake, it is said, never gives up her dead

G **D** **Asus2**
When the skies of November turn gloomy

Em
With a load of iron ore 26 thousand tons more

G **D** **Asus2**
Than the Edmund Fitzgerald weighed empty

Em
That good ship and true was a bone to be chewed

G **D** **Asus2**
When the gales of November came early

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2. **Asus2** **Em**
The ship was the pride of the American side

G **D** **Asus2**
Coming back from some mill in Wisconsin

Em
As the big freighters go, it was bigger than most

G **D** **Asus2**
With a crew and good captain well-seasoned

Em
Concluding some terms with a couple of steel firms

G **D** **Asus2**
When they left fully loaded for Cleveland

Em
And later that night when the ship's bell rang

G **D** **Asus2**
Could it be the north wind they'd been feeling?

Interlude (play last five bars of Intro figure)

3. **Asus2** **Em**
The wind in the wires made a tattle-tale sound

G **D** **Asus2**
And a wave broke over the railing

Em
And every man knew as the captain did too

G **D** **Asus2**
'Twas the witch of November come stealing

Em
The dawn came late and the breakfast had to wait

G **D** **Asus2**
When the gales of November came slashing

Em
When afternoon came it was freezing rain

G **D** **Asus2**
In the face of a hurricane west wind

Interlude (play Intro figure)

4. **Asus2** **Em**
When suppertime came the old cook came on deck saying

G **D** **Asus2**
Fellas, it's too rough to feed ya

Em
At seven P.M. a main hatchway caved in, he said

G **D** **Asus2**
Fellas, it's been good to know ya

Em
The captain wired in he had water coming in

G **D** **Asus2**
And the good ship and crew was in peril

Em
And later that night when his lights went out of sight

G **D** **Asus2**
Came the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald

Interlude (play Intro figure, plus two bars of Asus2)

5. **Asus2** **Em**
Does anyone know where the love of God goes

G **D** **Asus2**
When the waves turn the minutes to hours?

Em
The searchers all say they'd have made Whitefish Bay

G **D** **Asus2**
If they'd put 15 more miles behind her

Em
They might have split up or they might have capsized

G **D** **Asus2**
They may have broke deep and took water

Em
And all that remains is the faces and the names

G **D** **Asus2**
Of the wives and the sons and the daughters

Interlude (play Intro figure)

6. **Asus2** **Em**
Lake Huron rolls, Superior sings

G **D** **Asus2**
In the rooms of her ice-water mansion

Em
Old Michigan steams like a young man's dreams

G **D** **Asus2**
The islands and bays are for sportsmen

Em
And farther below Lake Ontario

G **D** **Asus2**
Takes in what Lake Erie can send her

Em
And the iron boats go as the mariners all know

G **D** **Asus2**
With the gales of November remembered

Interlude (play Intro figure twice, plus two bars of Asus2)

7. **Asus2** **Em**
In a musty old hall in Detroit they prayed

G **D** **Asus2**
In the maritime sailors' cathedral

Em
The church bell chimed till it rang 29 times

G **D** **Asus2**
For each man on the Edmund Fitzgerald

Em
The legend lives on from the Chippewa on down

G **D** **Asus2**
Of the big lake they call Gitche Gumee

Em
Superior, they said, never gives up her dead

G **D** **Asus2**
When the gales of November come early

Outro (play Intro figure twice and fade)

Dom Flemons



NATE KINARD JR

Rabbit Foot Rag

A fingerstyle showstopper in the ragtime guitar tradition

BY DOM FLEMONS

I wrote "Rabbit Foot Rag," as heard on my 2023 album, *Traveling Wildfire*, to be a piece that showcases my fingerpicking skills. The title of this composition is a reference to the old-time tent shows like the Rabbit Foot Minstrels and Silas Green from New Orleans—traveling performances that entertained audiences all over the Deep South. Many blues singers started their careers performing in the old-time tent shows, and the recordings that survive of these influential musicians provide a small window back in time to an era where the guitar began to rise in popularity.

As the name suggests, "Rabbit Foot Rag" is a ragtime-inspired composition. I find subtlety and excitement when fingerpicking on a beautiful steel-string, like my Fraulini Angelina made by luthier Todd Cambio. The midrange notes of the guitar sound so sweet I find myself picking the piece often just to warm up my fingers.

While I play "Rabbit Foot Rag" using mostly open chord shapes in the key of C major, I use a capo at the fourth fret, causing the music to sound a major third higher than fingered, in the key of E. The first section (bars 1–16) starts kind of simply, with a series of chord shapes—an open C with the fourth finger on string 1, shifted up two frets for D, then moved down for C, and so on—fingerpicked as double-stops or single notes. [Note that this transcription splits the difference between what Flemons played on the original studio recording and in the accompanying video lesson.—*ed.*]
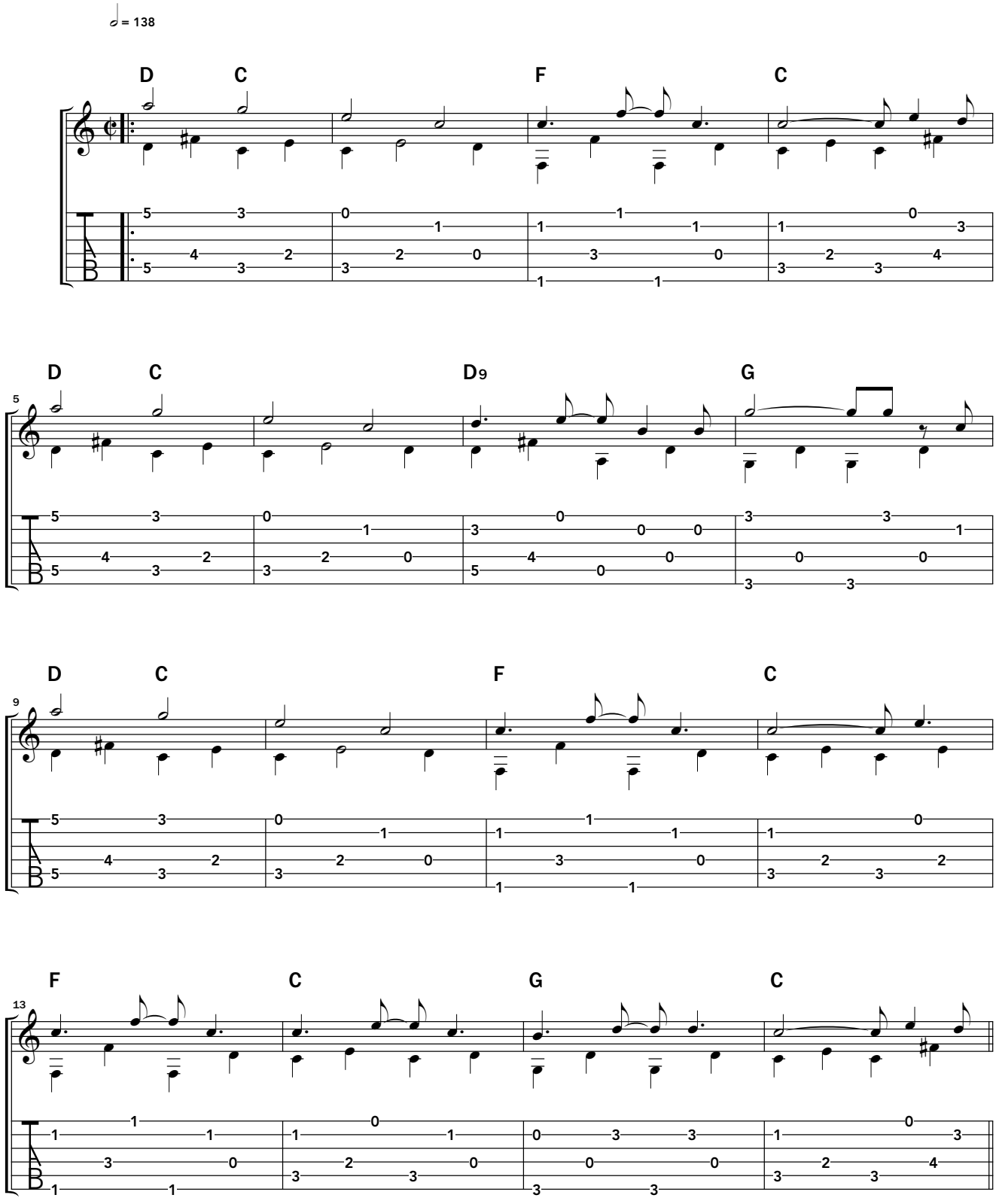
The section repeats, but with slight variations, starting at bar 17. Then, in bars 29–31, it comes to a close with the sort of picking variation I often like to use in a setting like this to break up the steady quarter-note bass pattern. Here I use three-finger rolls (thumb/index/middle) in steady eighth notes, grouped in threes such that the music feels like it is temporarily in a tuple meter. At the end of this section, I further disrupt the proceedings by adding a couple of brisk strums.

The second section begins in bar 33 with the somewhat surprising introduction of the III chord (E7). Note the quarter-step bend on the chord's flatted seventh (D)—I use my fourth finger to fret that note, gently nudging it toward the floor—leading into the IV chord (F). This four-bar phrase introduced in bars 33–36 is repeated two times before the piece settles into the II chord (D9) in measure 45.

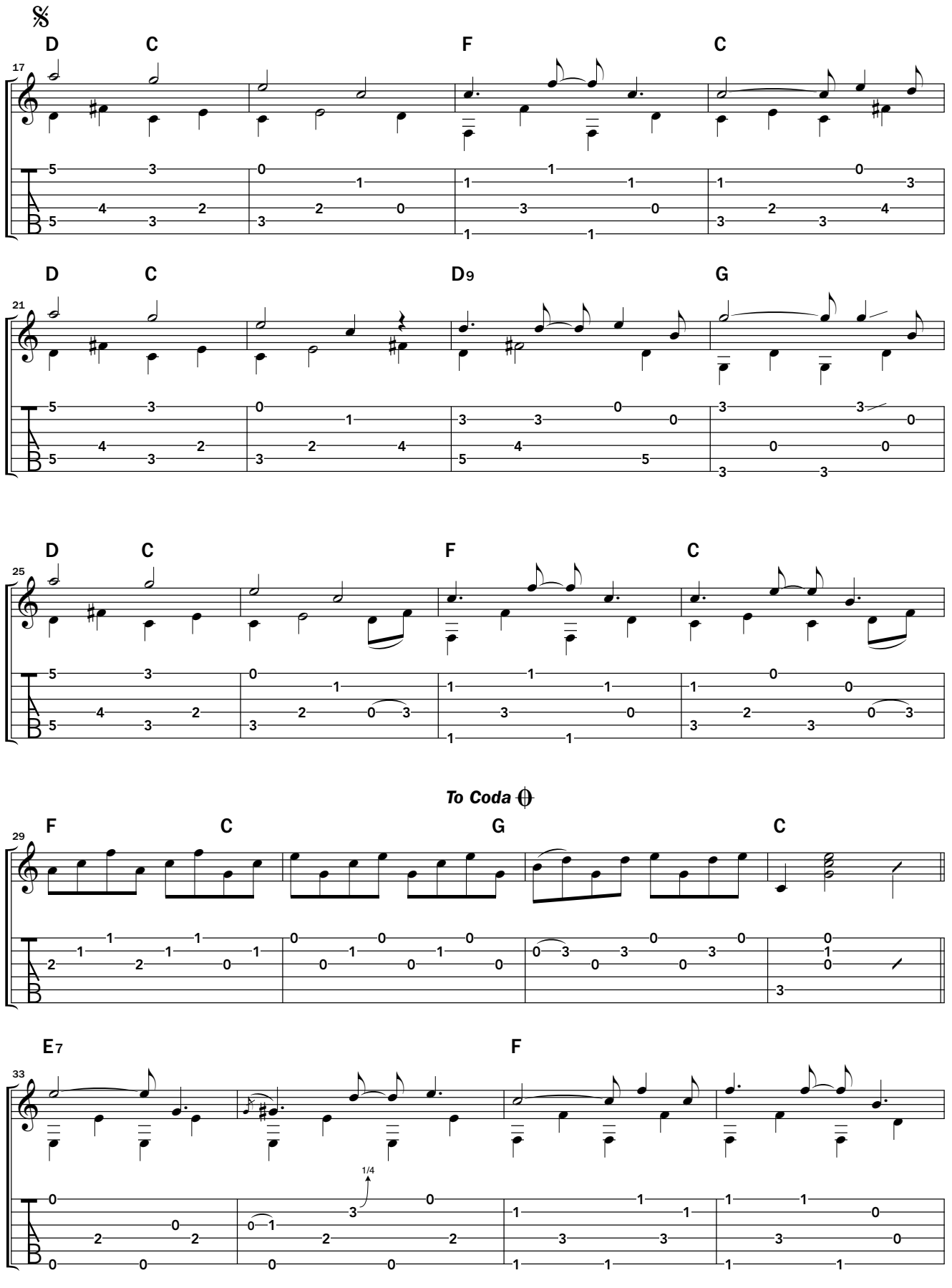
In bar 49, I have incorporated a jazzy "break" section. The break is a moment when the accompaniment drops out, leaving a space for an improvised melody to push the tune into the next section. Breaks like this can be found in any number of jazz compositions and instrumental records. I would recommend coming up with your own variations—one thing to keep in mind is to not play too many notes, as the break is much more exciting with subtle runs.
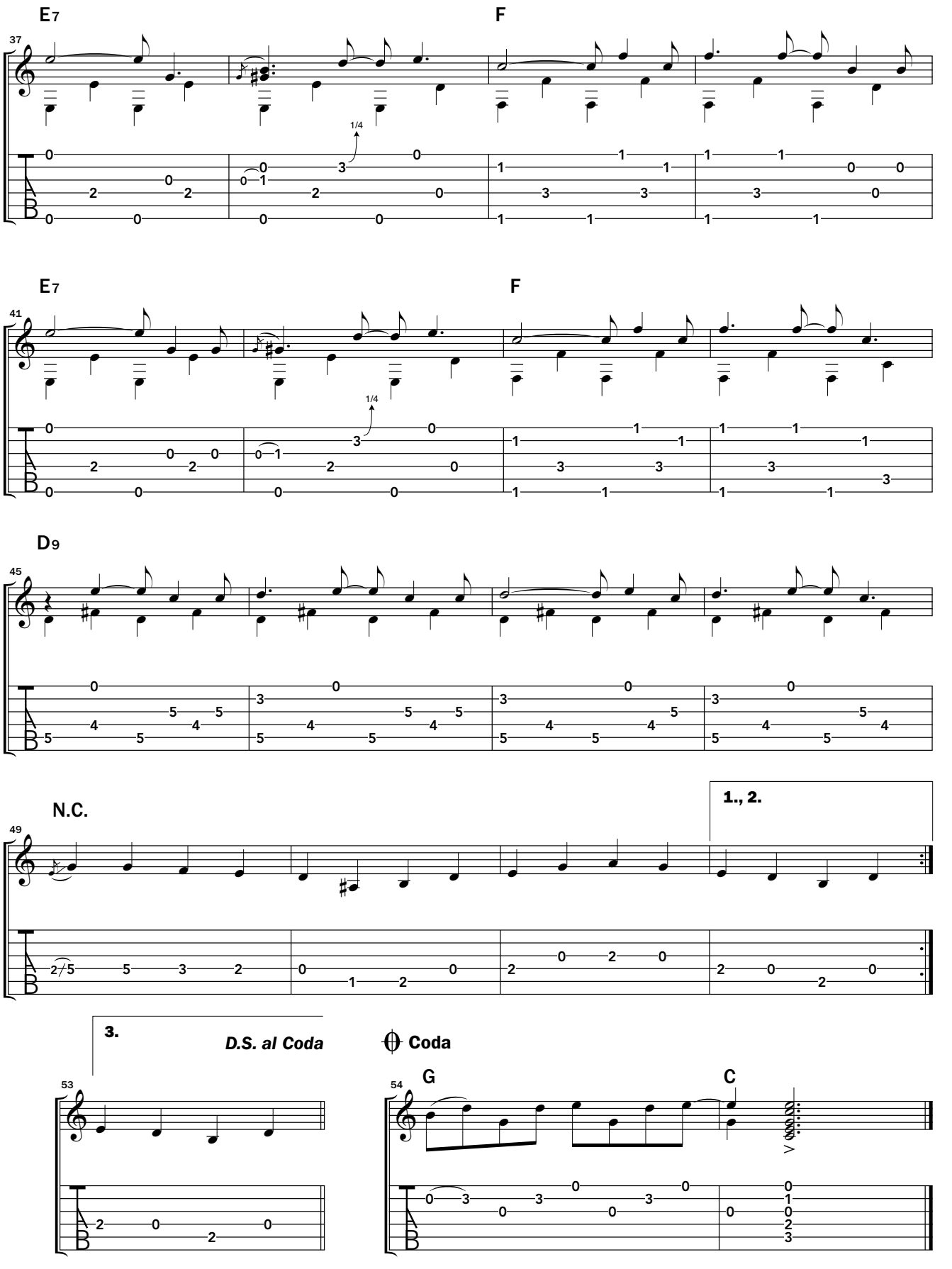
When I think back on learning pieces like this in the traditional setting, each performance of "Rabbit Foot Rag" is a showstopper. It can also be a vehicle for jamming. After you become familiar with the form itself, the composition leaves a lot of room for improvisation and variations on the main themes. Two guitarists picking together can even riff off of each other, making yet another way to enjoy this tune. It is my sincerest hope that guitar players will use "Rabbit Foot Rag" to reinvigorate jams all over the world. **AG**

Capo IV



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17
D C F C
21
D C D9 G
25
D C F C
To Coda
29
F C G C
33
E7 F
1/4


E7
F
37
1/4
E7
F
41
1/4
D9
45
N.C.
1., 2.
49
3.
D.S. al Coda
Coda
53
G
C
54

VIDEO LESSON
acousticguitar.com/342

Russ Barenberg



ERIC FROMMER

Big Sciota

A traditional fiddle tune popularized by flatpicking master Russ Barenberg

BY ALAN BARNOSKY

"Big Sciota," originally named "Big Scioty," is a popular fiddle tune played by pretty much all bluegrass pickers—go to any picking session and you're bound to hear it come up. While the tune is traditional, it wasn't until guitarist Russ Barenberg recorded it with dobro player Jerry Douglas, mandolinist Sam Bush, and bassist Edgar Meyer, for the 1993 album *Skip, Hop, and Wobble*, that "Big Sciota" was brought into the spotlight.

Throughout the 1970s and '80s, Barenberg was an active guitarist across the Northeast, collaborating with some of the area's finest musicians and performing regularly for contradances. He learned tons of fiddle tunes while playing in these dance bands, and one of them was "Big Scioty," which he first heard from harmonica player Mark Graham. In the mid-'80s, Barenberg moved to Nashville, where he teamed up with Douglas and Meyer to accompany Irish singer Maura O'Connell. After several years of collaborating, this trio recorded *Skip, Hop, and Wobble*, a collection of original instrumentals, plus the now-ubiquitous "Big Sciota."

I had the pleasure of meeting with Barenberg and talking about this tune. He noted that his playing on the original album version includes improvised variations that waver from the standard melody. Instead of a note-for-note transcription, the notation here depicts the arrangement that Barenberg uses to teach his students. This version is very similar to the recorded one, but its use of repeated sections and fewer stretches in the fretting hand make it easier to follow and learn.
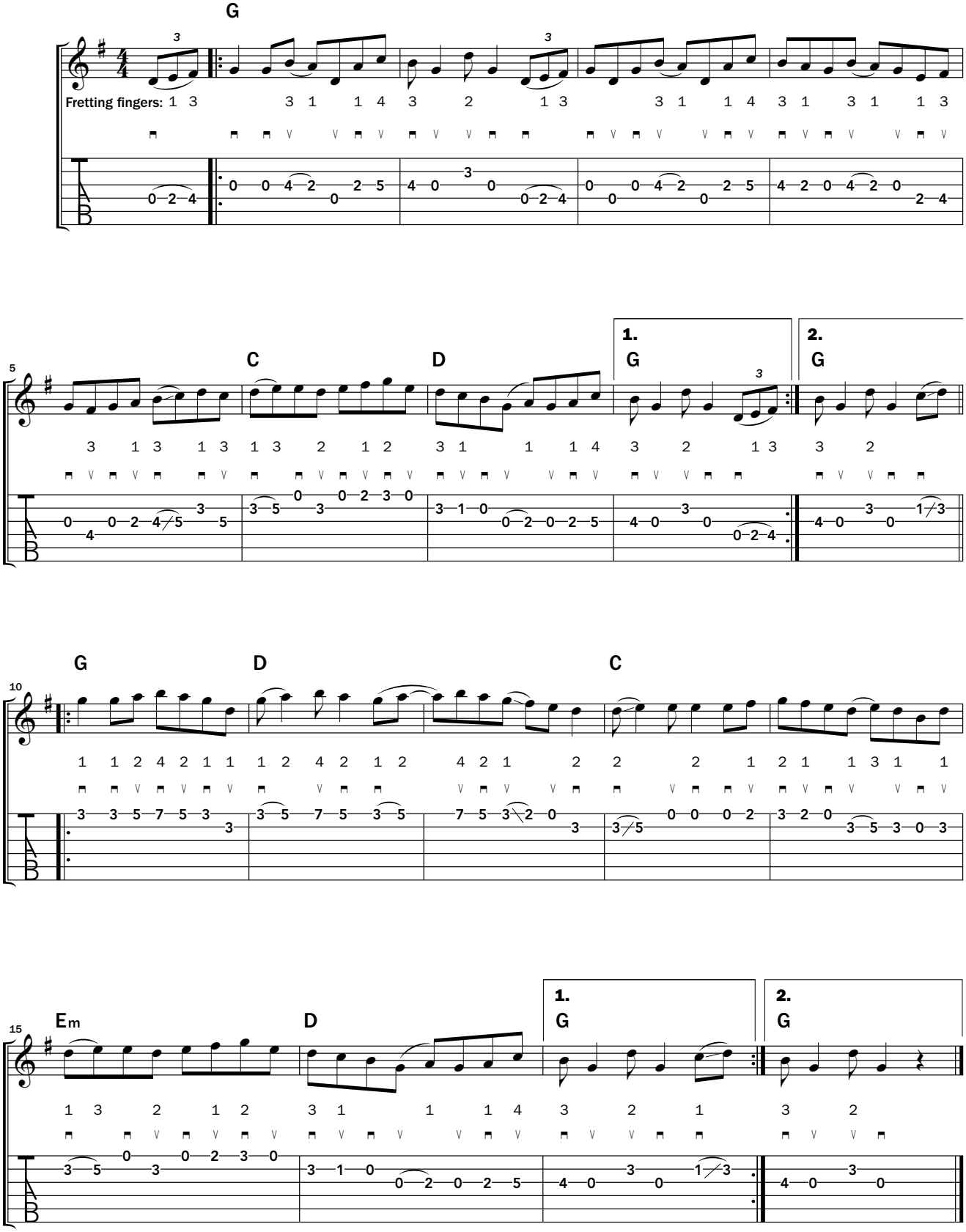
The notation shows Barenberg's suggested pick directions and fretting-hand fingerings, and the guitarist stresses the importance of both. He prefers alternate picking, where downstrokes are coordinated with the beats and upstrokes happen on the "ands." Picking this way helps give a rhythmic pulse that mimics that of a fiddler's bowing. The fretting-hand fingerings illustrate how Barenberg navigates the fingerboard, including slides to move up and down the neck and a liberal use of his fourth finger to reach higher frets. He also sometimes opts to play fretted notes even when open strings are available, like the B on string 3, fret 4.

This arrangement is a pull-off and hammer-on workout. The tune kicks off with a triplet hammer-on that reappears in the A section; there are pull-offs throughout from the third to the first finger. Barenberg likes to coordinate pulls to happen with upstrokes, as it helps to mimic the bouncing rhythm of a contradance band.

"Big Sciota" is not necessarily easy to play—especially at the very brisk tempo used by Barenberg, Douglas, and Meyer—so you might consider starting out with a learning application or other utility that allows you to alter the speed of a song without changing its pitch. But if you stick with it, you'll learn a fun and well-known tune while also developing some powerful chops in both hands. AG

BIG SCIOTA

TRADITIONAL, ARRANGED BY RUSS BARENBERG



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Drunken Sailor

Play a classic sea shanty with three simple chords

BY MAURICE TANI



Maurice Tani

Generally speaking, sea shanties are 19th-century shipboard work songs that are descendants of two primary sources: either the 18th-century work chants and sing-outs used by English and French sailors to coordinate certain tasks that required unanimous team effort, or the traditional work songs sung by African and African American laborers. The era of sea shanties as we know them appeared shortly after the War of 1812, reached its peak as work songs on sailing ships in the 1870s, and died with the eventual switch to engine power, which required far less coordinated manual labor on deck.

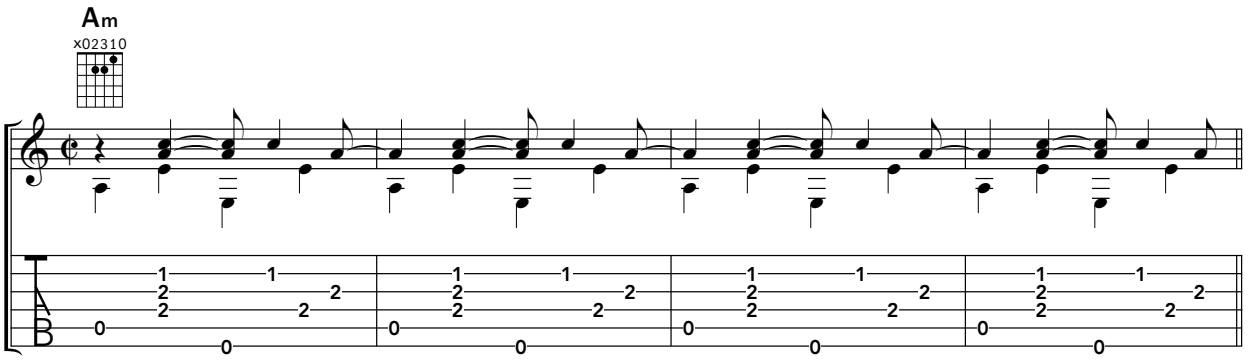
"Drunken Sailor," aka "Up She Rises," is one of the best-known sea shanties still in circulation. There's not a lot to learn with this classic tune. With a light amount of digging, you can find some more ornate arrangements, but our campfire version uses a traditional, simple four-bar pattern using just three chords: Am, G, and C. The heart of this song is in the joy of group singing and the colorful, early morning treatments the singers are suggesting for their compromised colleague.

My arrangement includes a few of the more familiar verses, but this is a song that has had centuries to develop variations and alternate lyrics. Vary as they may, they generally stick to a theme of making crew members think carefully about returning from shore with any number of their sheets to the wind. So, what shall we do with a drunken sailor? AG

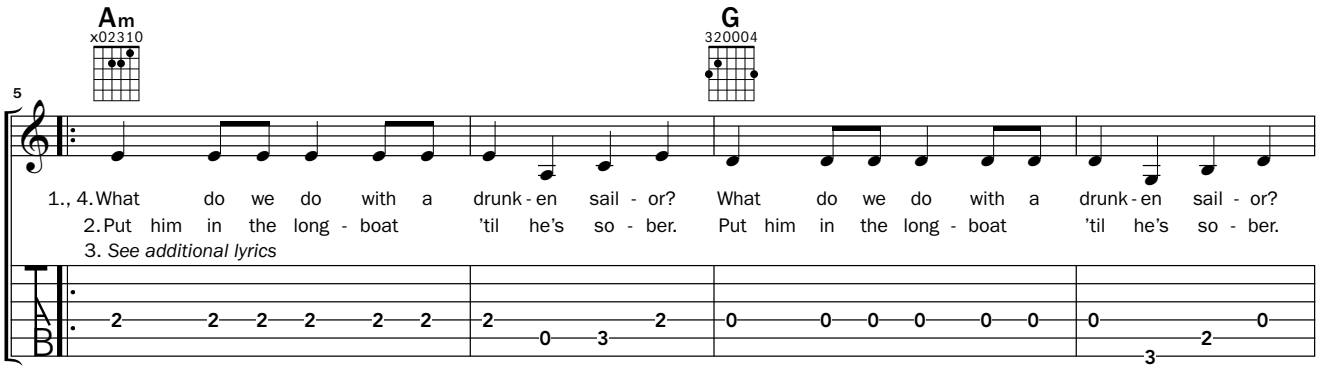
DRUNKEN SAILOR

TRADITIONAL, ARRANGED BY MAURICE TANI
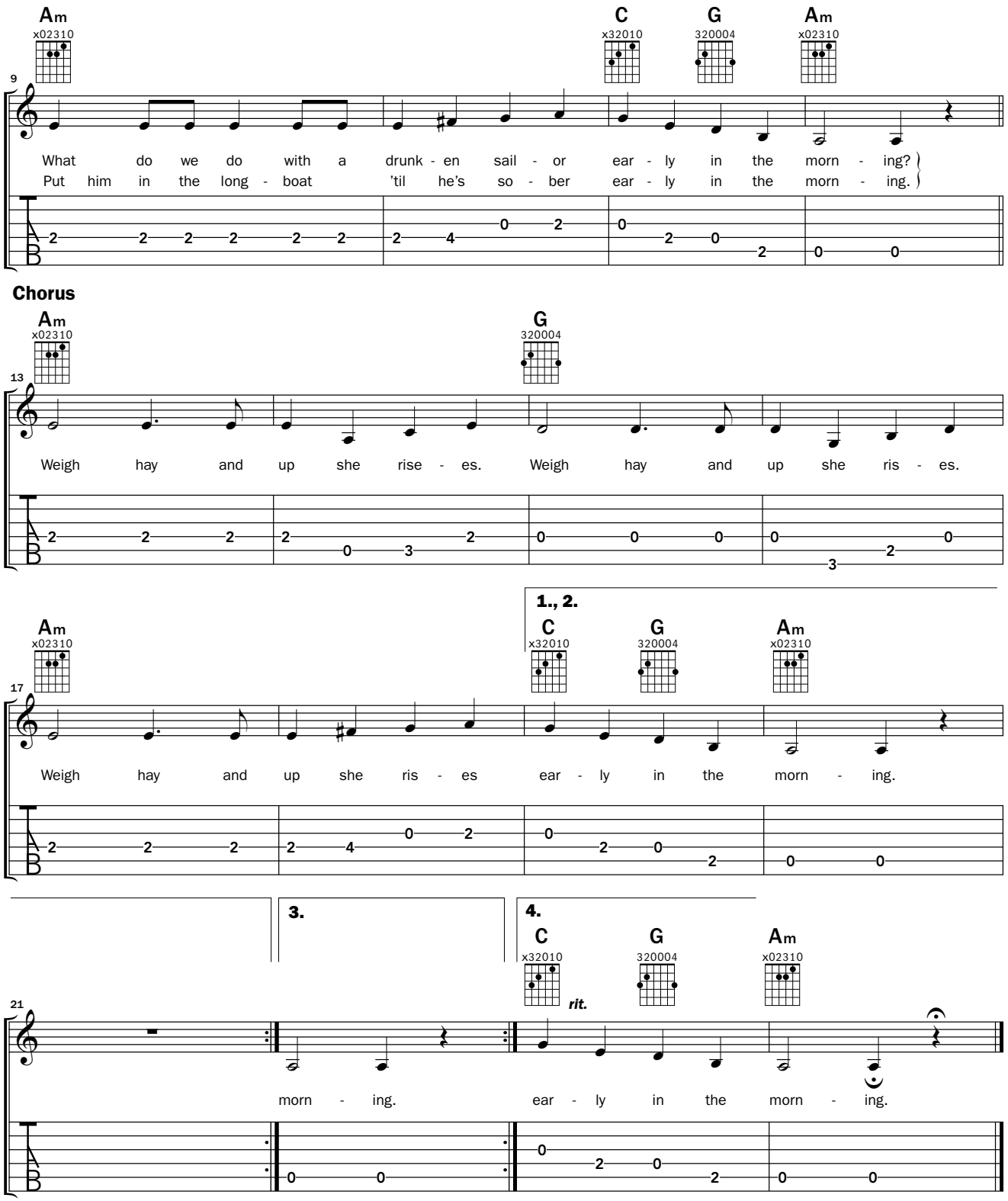
Intro/Accompaniment Pattern



Verse



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3. Put him in the hole with the *captain's daughter
Put him in the hole with the captain's daughter
Put him in the hole with the captain's daughter
Early in the morning

*Captain's daughter is the nickname for the cat o' nine tails, a whip made of knotted cords and used for corporal punishment.

MAKERS & SHAKERS





COURTESY OF REUBEN COX

Reuben Cox (left) and a Stella guitar with his rubber-bridge modification

L.A. Story

How Reuben Cox of Old Style Guitar Shop came to build and tweak guitars for stars and hobbyists alike

BY EMILE MENASCHÉ

Every luthier has an interesting backstory, but I have yet to encounter one who came to the profession—or approaches it—quite the same way as Reuben Cox, owner of Old Style Guitar Shop in Los Angeles as well as a guitar maker and repair tech. Whether working on guitars for Jackson Browne, building a rubber bridge for an instrument powering a Taylor Swift hit, or setting up some kid's cheap acoustic, Cox keeps chasing a sound—and inviting the world along for the ride.

From the woods of North Carolina to a magnet math and science boarding school to an art degree in New York City and a career teaching at the college level, Cox says he never even dreamed of opening a guitar shop until he decided to take the plunge—smack in the middle of the biggest economic crisis since the Great Depression. Oh, and throw in the fact that he designed his first instruments from a template he created by blowing up a picture on a Kinko's copying machine.

And yet it all makes perfect sense. A self-confessed music obsessive and guitar lover who realized early in life that he wasn't going to be a musician, Cox started building instruments as a hobby, using the art-department resources and the woodworking skills he developed while making field cameras.

Informed by his curiosity about sound, openness to unconventional materials, and democratic embrace of affordable guitars, Cox, the subject of the 2022 documentary *Really Good Rejects*, has become an unlikely celebrity among artists and producers. Some play his distinctive semi-hollow electrics, while others, like Bob Dylan, Phoebe Bridgers, and many more, play the guitars that he has modified with rubber bridges. I chatted with Cox from his L.A. workshop to learn more about his unconventional path in the music world.

How did you become a luthier?

It happened by entirely by accident. I used to live in New York City and worked in a couple of art schools teaching, and also worked as a photographer. I always had an interest in music and guitars.

Working at Cooper Union and Sarah Lawrence College, I had access to the sculpture shop. So just as a hobby, I was able to learn how to make one specific kind of hollowbody electric guitar. I would make one or two a year.

Did you play in bands?

I've never been in a band. As a teenager I got a guitar, and Mother Nature quickly let me know that I was in possession of no notable musical talent. I had the good sense to move on from that. But I'm a big music obsessive and have always loved guitars.

Why did you decide to go to Los Angeles to start your business?

My partner at the time worked for a record label, and they asked her to move to Los Angeles so she could open up a West Coast office. As the tagalong spouse, I had to give up a pretty good setup in New York, with teaching jobs, darkrooms, sculpture workshops, and all that. But I was also kind of burned out on art schools and lazy students, institutional politics, etc. In the hysteria of the move, I just decided to open up a guitar shop. I thought, If I crash and burn, I'll just knock on the door of an art school in Los Angeles and try to pick up where I left off.

Had you ever even worked in a music store?

I went into it with no knowledge of retail—at one of worst times in American history to start a new business, in 2009, 2010, after the crash. I blindly and naively jumped into it. I set up a woodshop in the basement of my house in Los Angeles, which I'm sitting in now. Around six months later, after building an inventory, I got a [retail] place in Silver Lake. The idea was small and cheap: Keep the overhead low, and just jump into it.

You were making guitars before you had the shop. How did you learn to repair and modify other people's instruments?

I learned as I went. I knew how to use woodworking tools, but as far as repairs and setups, I just learned on the job. The first three or four

years in the shop were me nervously watching YouTube videos and hoping I didn't destroy someone's personal property by doing a poor refret or neck reset.

You get good at it by doing it over and over again. It's not like learning how to do quadratic equations where you learn it once and you've got it. With lot of guitar repairs, you pull it off acceptably, but after you've done it for years, you're like, Okay, now I'm really good at this particular skill. And I've done it a lot: If you count basic setups and repairs, I've probably done anywhere from 12–14,000 guitars.

Were your own guitars patterned after a specific model?

Long ago, someone gave me *The Guitar Handbook* by Ralph Denyer. It's just a survey of the instrument with pictures of different models, like a 1940s Bigsby. And I just love the shape of it with that Florentine cutaway. The first guitars I made—and a lot of them that I still make—were inspired by that. I took this book to Kinko's, threw it down on the Xerox, enlarged the picture to the size I wanted, and used that as the first template.

What gave you the confidence to make it your livelihood?

In the spring of 2009, before I moved to Los Angeles, I got to know Bryce and Aaron Dessner from the National through my ex-partner. I was like, "Hey, I just finished building a few guitars. And you're welcome to borrow them." So they borrowed a few. I think they were okay—they weren't standout stellar, but they were pretty good guitars.

These guys are very serious about recording and extremely particular about sounds. They ended up using a couple of them on the record. That gave me the ego boost to start this job, which I just kind of pulled out of thin air. I'd never dreamed of having a guitar store before that. Had that moment not happened, would I be here now today? Would I be doing something different? It's hard to know. That was a crucial moment—a vote of affirmation that I could pull it off.

Would you say that you have a signature model or very specific design aesthetic?

I think they're all one-offs. I just want to keep it interesting. I might choose new pickups or vintage pickups or whatever wood I can get my hands on. Generally, lumberyard wood is kind of disappointing because it's cut from young trees. It's just fussy when you put it through a saw. If you can, find old wood, which is around, or recycle old furniture or something like that. I mean, [the guitars] are all within a kind of specific bandwidth in shape. And they're all hollow-bodies, book-matched top and back with bandsaw-cut outsides and a center block. But I try to keep them subtly different rather than locking in one specific design and making it over and over again.

Does music—be it a genre or artist—influence your design aesthetic?

I think one thing that affects the guitars the most is that L.A. is a real repository for great musicians. I've had the good fortune to work with a lot of really interesting people with highly developed ears. You get so much terrific feedback. Building guitars for someone like Jackson Browne—he wants to run it down until it's perfect. When you're dealing with someone like that, it's not a bother. They're not being fussy. They're just trying to find the best possible endpoint—how well can I do this?

Whether it's cooking or painting or building a guitar, we should be aspiring to do that thing as well as we can. If I have some cockamamie idea for, like, a pickup or whatever, I can ask any number of people to try it out and see if it sinks or floats. There are so many people in L.A. who are hungry for new sounds and new ideas or something that's going to get them out of their heads. Exploring certain guitars, you hear a different sound, and it makes you write a song. That's the kind of stuff that gets me most excited.

How did you start to build that credibility among musicians?

Just working 65-hour weeks for a decade—and getting better and better at basic setups. In L.A., if there's a new guitar shop, musicians are going to show up because they're curious. People are searching. Someone once said, "Oh, Jackson Browne goes to your guitar shop." And I said, "Jackson Browne goes to *all* the guitar shops—because he's *looking*, you know?"

And it's not just famous people that I'm trying to court. It's very much a working man and working woman's shop. I do a lot of setups on Fender Squiers—stuff that a lot of shops turn away. It's just this endless *I Love Lucy* bonbon factory scenario: basic setups and pickup swaps.

High-end guitar shops have collectible, expensive instruments. I have a very small handful of expensive guitars, which I sell on rare occasions. It's just less my world. Interesting musicians who are touring and recording, who are young, often have less money. Someone throwing down for $5,000 or $10,000 guitars may be a collector. Nothing wrong with that, but it's just much more exciting for me to see someone take something that I've built or modified and record a song with it. The artist and producer Mike Viola, whom I've known for years, walked in my shop and picked up this baritone rubber-bridged guitar that I had just finished and he immediately started playing this riff. Flash forward to his next record and it's the first song.

I keep coming back to the fact that you were a visual artist before a luthier. Does that influence your approach?

I always tell people—they're like, "Oh, there's this guitar, but I wish it was black. Is that shallow of me?" And I'm like, "Hell, no, this is show business! Looks matter, you know?" It's all intertwined. And maybe if something looks a certain way, it makes you want to pick it up and play it.

What are you working on now?

I've been restoring a lot of these old guitars into this rubber-bridge thing that I invented.

What is the idea behind the rubber bridge that you have been installing on cheapo acoustics?

It's something that I adapted—maybe inventing it is a stretch, but, you know, it's L.A., so we talk like that here. [*Laughs.*] I was taking photographs of Andrew Bird and Blake Mills at a recording session. Blake had this '50s Harmony banjo that had a kind of muting system. I guess the idea was to figure out how you can get the sound of a banjo in an era when pickups for acoustic banjos didn't exist. A banjo is all attack and no sustain. It had this wood and rubber kind of thing. I listened to playback, and it was one of the most exciting things I'd heard in a long time. That evening, Blake sent me some pictures and a couple of videos of the instrument. I just kind of knocked out a prototype—it took me like two hours to crank out this guitar. The next day I dropped it off at Blake's house. He plugged it in and started playing. It was incredible—I think are some videos on his Instagram page.

That bridge has really gotten a lot of attention from some famous artists, including Taylor Swift, who used one on her album *Folklore*.

It's nothing I ever advertised, still to this day. It's just been word of mouth. And they've ended up on a lot of great records. People buy them and say, "Oh, my God, I went home. And the same evening, I wrote four songs!" You know, it's really been inspirational to a lot of people. That's about as gratifying as it gets for a vocation. **AG**





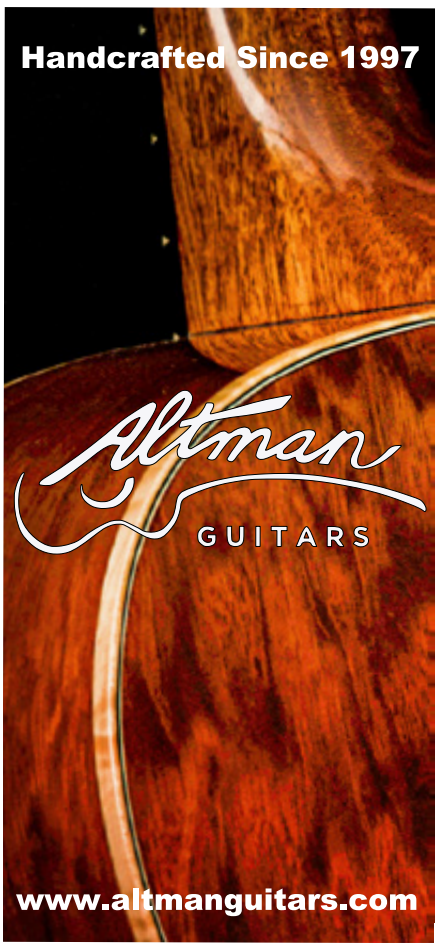


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WORTH THE INVESTMENT ★★★★★ *Paul Gerardi on Feb 22, 2023*

Love the magazine. Want to keep it coming and alive for all the excellent content, in print and online. There is very little out there dedicated solely to the acoustic guitar. Thanks! And glad to help out a little as a sustaining member.

In a Bind

Should you repair the crumbling celluloid binding on a vintage guitar?

BY MARTIN KEITH

Q: I have a 1972 Gibson J-55 and it sounds great, but the binding is deteriorating, and the original pickguard was shrinking and has been removed. I had a luthier tell me the lining in the guitar case is the root of these problems, which I find hard to believe. What is the real reason, and is it worth investing in repairing the instrument? —*Jim Weber*

A: There are a few good questions here, and I'll try to touch on each of them. Let's begin with the deteriorating plastic. In previous columns, we've discussed the unfortunately all-too-common problem of celluloid plastic degrading over time, as the plasticizers in the polymer migrate out and evaporate. The vapors from this process are corrosive and can cause rust, oxidation, and discoloration in surrounding metals, finishes, glues, and even case lining. This has led some people to believe that it is the case lining affecting the plastic, as the discoloration on the lining matches the location of the plastic on the guitar. However, in almost all cases (ha!) the plastic binding is itself the root of the issue. The pickguard most likely suffered the same fate.

I say almost all cases because I have come across instances of cases causing damage to guitar finishes. Usually, these situations arise when either the case or the guitar (or both) is quite new and still releasing solvents from its manufacture. Case lining and foam padding are often applied with solvent-based cements, and the dense, plush fabric and foam can retain these vapors longer than some would expect. Also, modern molded cases are quite good at maintaining a closed airspace, so the residual solvent vapors often accumulate in a new case. Similarly, some guitar finishes, especially nitrocellulose lacquer, can dry quickly on their surface, creating a skin that traps solvents in the lower layers. These solvents have to slowly migrate out of the finish, a process that can take weeks or even months depending on the thickness of the finish and how quickly it was applied. When either or both of these conditions exist, the unfortunate result can be case fur that imprints a rough texture on the guitar's glossy surface—in some cases even leaving fur stuck to the finish. In rare instances, I've also heard of cases imprinting their texture into finishes after long periods of storage, usually in warm places such as attics. However, this doesn't sound like what happened in your situation.

Closeup of the degrading binding on a 1972 Gibson J-55



COURTESY OF JIM WEBER



Martin Keith

GOT A QUESTION?

Uncertain about guitar care and maintenance? The ins-and-outs of guitar building? Or another topic related to your gear? Ask *Acoustic Guitar*'s repair expert Martin Keith by sending an email titled "Repair Expert" to Editors.AG@stringletter.com and we'll forward it to Keith.



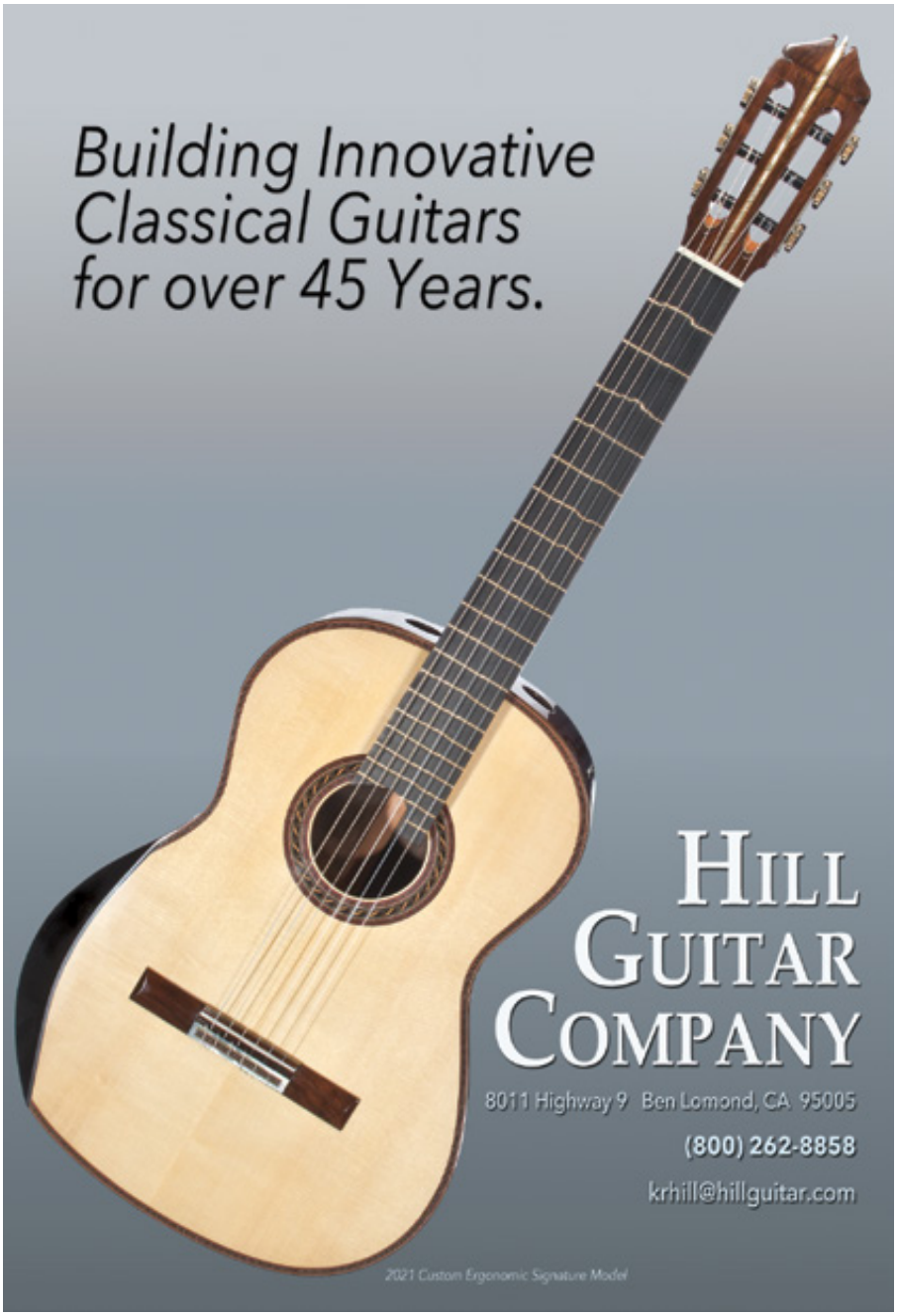
If your question is selected for publication, you'll receive a complimentary copy of *AG*'s *Acoustic Guitar Owner's Manual.*

Binding replacements on vintage guitars are becoming increasingly common as more and more old celluloid turns to dust, but the repair is labor intensive and expensive, and many of my clients prefer to simply leave the old, crumbled binding as is. This brings us to the last part of your question—cost of repair vs. instrument value. As a repair luthier, I guide clients through this conversation quite regularly, and it's not always simple. Guitarists often develop relationships with their instruments that are full of personal history and meaning. The value of these kinds of things is hard to calculate but certainly worth considering. I've done full restorations on old folk instruments, and in some cases the repair estimates were more than double the realistic street value of the guitar. In these cases, I am always frank with clients, and more often than not they proceed with the repair, since the instrument usually holds sentimental or personal value that more than makes up for the monetary differences.

There is no right or wrong on this type of repair, as long as you find a luthier who is able to do quality work that is appropriate to the quality of the guitar.

With vintage guitars, I also feel it's important to maintain and preserve their function and structural health wherever possible. A 1972 J-55 may not be the most valuable vintage guitar right now, but in 30 years it will likely be worth quite a bit more. I've seen the market value of late '70s Fender electrics go up dramatically since I started playing, and even some '80s instruments are now showing up under the vintage banner. Some kinds of repair work, like a well-done neck reset, will preserve or even enhance market value. Binding replacement is trickier—it generally involves some amount of refinishing, which can lower market value. For this reason, I always do binding replacements without a full refinish—rather, I work around the existing finish, and then touch up the new bindings to match. This process is much more laborious, but it preserves the originality of the guitar as much as possible.

If your goal is to sell the guitar, my advice would be to skip the repair and let the next owner make these decisions. There may well be a player out there who couldn't care less about the condition of the binding and might even appreciate the vintage vibe it offers. If you wish to keep the guitar, then this simply becomes a question of your own visual and functional preferences, and your personal history with the guitar. There is no right or wrong on this type of repair, as long as you find a luthier who is able to do good work that is appropriate to the quality of the guitar. Beware of anyone who says this is a quick and easy job—if they think it is, they're probably not doing it right! AG



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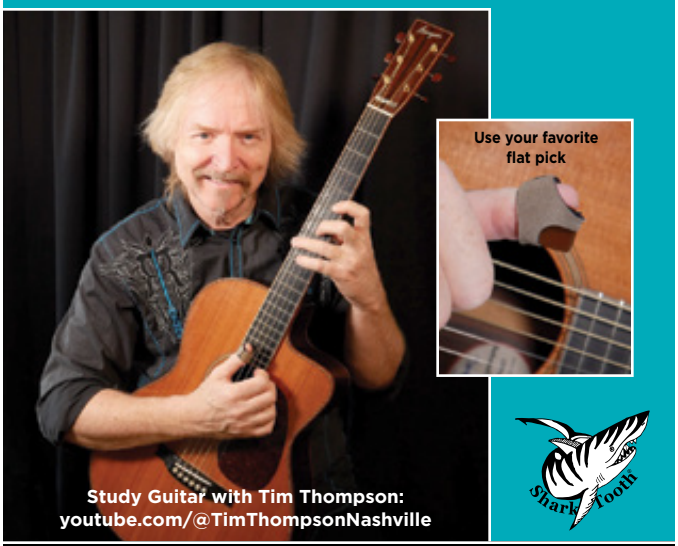
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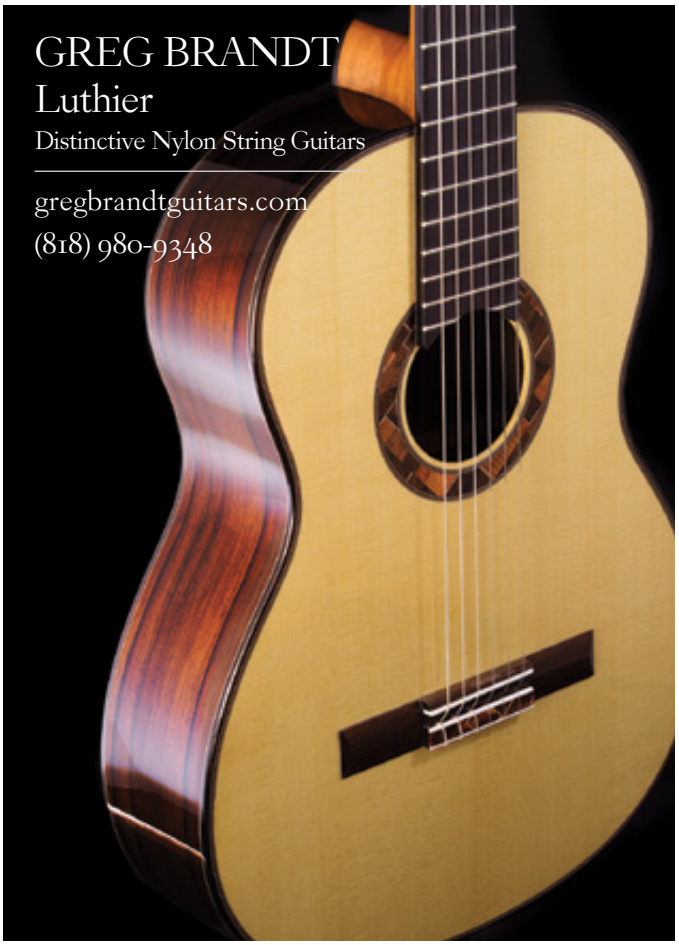


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Córdoba Stage

A gig-ready thinline that plays like an electric guitar but sounds like a classical

BY GREG RUBY

Córdoba Guitars is synonymous with high-quality, nylon-string classical and flamenco guitars, many of them offered at affordable price points. One of the Southern California company's latest creations, the Stage model, delivers build quality and innovation in an instrument that could complement the quiver of any versatile guitarist. It's easy to play, visually appealing, and possesses a state-of-the-art Fishman electronics system that delivers a full nylon-string acoustic tone—even when you push the volume.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

When I first removed the Stage from its recycled nylon gig bag, I was immediately taken with the guitar's visual charms. Its flamed maple veneer top has a vibrant grain pattern framed by a darker wooden binding that perfectly matches the pau ferro fretboard. Three trapezoidal soundholes (a nod to the maker's graphic logo, which was inspired by the arches of a historic cathedral in Córdoba, Spain) at the upper bout aesthetically balance a trio of walnut control knobs at the lower bout. This motif is repeated in pearl inlays on the headstock—another classy touch. All in all, the details here are at once classic and modern, a delight to the eye.

SMART DESIGN AND EXECUTION

The Stage's thinline chambered mahogany body is sleek, measuring just 1-1/2 inches deep, with a solid spruce top underneath the maple veneer. A deep Venetian cutaway provides easy access to the highest notes of the fingerboard—the 19th fret on string 6, scooping to the 22nd on the top two strings.

The backside of the guitar reveals a nine-volt battery chamber, along with a control cavity cover, for accessing the electronics. The neck heel is cleanly seated against the body, and the back edge of the upper waist is rounded, to provide extra playing comfort. Overall, the construction is very clean, and close attention appears to have been given to every detail of the build.

I have long thought that any new guitar acquisition, whether modern or vintage, should



COURTESY OF CÓRDOBA GUITARS

be set up by a professional technician who is familiar with your preferences and playing style. The Stage is no exception. While the frets on the review guitar were snugly seated, the intonation was slightly sharp at the 12th fret, and I found the action a tad high as I ascended the neck. Additionally, the fifth and sixth strings had a mild buzz past the ninth fret—common out-of-the-box issues that are minor and can likely be corrected with proper setup.

OUTSTANDING PLAYABILITY

The Stage is incredibly comfortable to play, whether sitting or standing. When I'm seated with the lower waist resting on my right leg, the guitar suspends itself in perfect balance. The instrument is outfitted with a pair of gold strap buttons—a small but convenient detail not commonly seen on nylon-string guitars—and it nestles right into my arms when I strap the it on.

With its C-shaped, mahogany neck and radiused fretboard, the Stage handles more like a semi-hollow electric than a traditional classical or flamenco guitar, making it ideal for a steel-string player wanting to explore nylon-string sounds without any adjustment in technique. And as primarily an acoustic steel-string player, I admittedly find it a chore to navigate the wide nut of a typical nylon-string guitar. However, the Stage's bone nut measures a relatively narrow 1-7/8 inches, and the string spacing is quite comfortable for playing chords of all types as well as single-note lines. I could even easily apply my go-to Django Reinhardt chords—those unconventional shapes requiring the tip of one fretting finger to cover two strings at the same time.

AN ATTRACTIVE VOICE

The Stage is clearly designed to be amplified. When played unplugged, it is noticeably quiet—not unpleasant-sounding, but about a third of the volume of the typical acoustic steel-string. That said, it is tonally well balanced, with the bottom two strings providing just enough low end to blend nicely with the midrange and higher-register notes. Inevitably, an unplugged thinline will give you more string than body sound, but I only found this distracting when playing single note lines past the fifth fret on the top two strings.

To properly audition the Stage, I started by fingerpicking my way through the nylon-string standard "Malagueña" in first position. The bass was full and clearly articulated, while the treble maintained a bright, cutting presence. I then strummed through an Andalusian cadence in A minor just using my fingers. Pushing the tempo and attack, the guitar responded with well-balanced, robust chords that didn't distort.



Turning back to fingerpicking, I improvised on the Beatles' "Blackbird," using chord shapes up and down the neck with a combination of fretted notes and open strings that rang together beautifully. The Stage truly spoke to me when I comped an original bossa nova composition. The tune's chord progression covers a wide range of the fretboard, and the guitar delivered balance and note separation in each position.

I then picked up a plectrum and tried out a chord-melody arrangement of Django Reinhardt's "Nuages." The single notes sung out from the tops of the chords, but I had to be careful to avoid unintentionally bending the strings due to their lower tension (relative to steel strings). I ended the session with another improvisation, on a Willie Nelson–approved version of the Irving Berlin classic "Blue Skies," and the guitar responded with an immediacy to the dynamics and articulations.

STAGE READY

The crowning feature of the Stage is perhaps its electronics package. Designed in collaboration with Fishman, this two-way system combines an undersaddle pickup with an internal body mic and has minimal controls—just volume, blend, and tone.

When I plugged the Stage into my Henriksen Blu Six amplifier, the guitar came to life. With the blend knob, I could easily navigate between the pickup and mic in order to dial in the most natural sound. I found the single tone knob preferable to a several-band EQ, as it enabled me to more easily adjust the timbre on the fly. Most important, the three controls offer plenty of flexibility for dialing in a full acoustic sound in a variety of settings.

THE BOTTOM LINE

If you're looking for a guitar that is comfortable, easy to play, and can provide authentic nylon-string sounds in a variety of performance settings, the Córdoba Stage would make a great choice—especially if you are a steel-string player looking to explore new tonal colors. While this handsome guitar is, as the name suggests, clearly designed to be heard and seen on stage, it would also make an excellent practice guitar for those quiet after-hours sessions, or even a great travel companion—all for well under a grand. AG

SPECS

BODY Chambered mahogany body with cutaway; 38mm (1-1/2") depth; solid spruce top with flamed maple veneer; three-piece fan bracing; pau ferro bridge with compensated bone saddle; gloss polyurethane finish

NECK C-shaped mahogany neck (three-piece); dual-action truss rod; pau ferro fretboard; 16" radius; 22 frets; 650mm (25.6") scale length; 48mm (1-7/8") bone nut; Córdoba 14:1 tuners

OTHER Fishman Stage electronics; Savarez 510AJ Alliance/Cantiga HT strings; deluxe gig bag

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COURTESY OF TASCAM

Tascam Portacapture X6 and X8

High-resolution handheld recorders ideal for tracking acoustic guitar–and a whole lot more

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

As with all things digital, recording technology has seen great advancements in recent years. An excellent case in point is the Portacapture series of high-resolution handheld recorders offered by Tascam, the same company that revolutionized home recording through its Portastudio, the first multitrack cassette recorder, which debuted in 1979. I checked out the Portacapture X8 and its streamlined sibling, the X6, and was as impressed by their ease of use as their excellent sonics and ability to capture wide dynamic ranges.

PACKED WITH FEATURES

Similar in concept to portable recorders like Zoom's H6 and H8 and Sony's PCM-D10, both the X6 (on sale for $299 street at press time) and the X8 ($399) include a pair of condenser microphones and are housed in sturdy plastic enclosures with the same sort of touchscreen interface found on many smartphones. The models work similarly, but there are some key differences: The X6's 10mm mics are built in and can be rotated into a true X-Y or A-B pattern, while the X8's 14.6mm duo detaches to form those same configurations. On the X6 there are two XLR mic/line inputs, compared to four XLR/TRS combo jacks on the X8. The V6 has a 3.5-inch LCD color display, vs. a 2.4-inch screen on the V6.

Though both Portacapture devices offer manual settings for those with more recording experience, they boast a suite of apps tailored to specific uses—podcasting, different types of instruments, field recording, voice, and ASMR, with the X8 adding a handy tuner and metronome. Neither has internal storage, and for remote recordings where you don't have a separate computer or DAW you can use an optional microSD card of up to 512GB. Each Portacapture can operate wirelessly via Bluetooth with an optional adapter and can be mounted to any tripod with a quarter-inch thread.

IN USE

It's very intuitive to find the appropriate app from the Portacapture's onscreen menu and start recording. Using several different-sounding guitars—a Collings OM1 A SB Traditional, Kenny Hill signature nylon-string, and Solomon Phidelity archtop—I tried the preset optimized for acoustic guitar. With their HDDA mic preamps and high resolution, both units captured the character of these instruments in surprisingly vivid and lifelike ways.

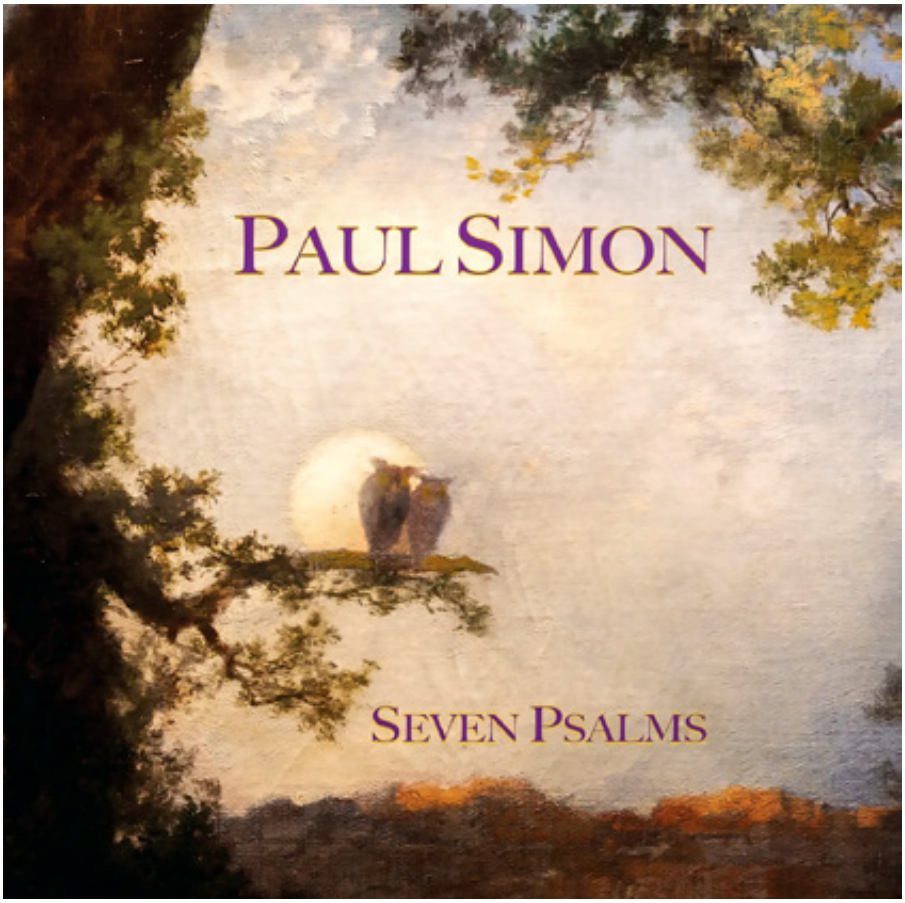
I especially appreciate the recorders' 32-bit floating recording technology, which allows for a massive dynamic range—a real game changer. You needn't worry about clipping from a loud sound source or noisiness when trying to record quiet sounds. In other words, setting the recording level is pretty much irrelevant—ideal if you're an inexperienced recordist or, say, one who tracked an inspired performance but forgot to first check the recording level.

Similarly convenient are the recorders' onboard effects. The acoustic guitar mode, for instance, features a handful of reverb types from large hall to plate, so you can dial in a recording without having to transfer it to external recording software. That said, the recorders can also double as USB audio interfaces for those who require postproduction flexibility, and this of course removes the need for a microSD card.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Though I barely scratched the surface of what the Portacapture X6 and X8 can deliver, it is obvious that these recorders are convenient and powerful tools for acoustic guitarists, providing professional-quality sound with a minimum of fuss. Whether you're a seasoned recordist or a newbie, a Portacapture might be just what you need for capturing your music whenever—and wherever—inspiration strikes.

tascam.com AG



Paul Simon, *Seven Psalms* (Owl Records/Legacy Recordings)

Out of a Dream

Paul Simon meditates on faith and spotlights his guitar on *Seven Psalms*

BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS

Back in 2016, Paul Simon mused in an NPR interview about stepping away from songwriting—to experience for the first time in 60 years what it feels like *not* to write songs. And then, in 2018, he wrapped up what was billed as his farewell tour.

But if Simon appeared to be hanging up his hat as a singer-songwriter, the muse was apparently not done with him. In January 2019, by his account, he had a dream announcing that he was working on a piece called *Seven Psalms*. Intrigued, he wrote down the phrase, and on subsequent nights found himself waking in the pre-dawn hours with additional words. Always a believer in chasing inspiration without necessarily understanding its source or meaning, Simon followed the dream instruction—and now we have the result.

It's remarkable to say that even after all these decades of exploring all sorts of sonic and stylistic terrain, from Simon and Garfunkel's *Sounds of Silence* and *Bridge Over Troubled Water* to the solo landmarks *Still Crazy After All These Years, Graceland,* and *The Rhythm of the Saints,* up through more recent gems like *So Beautiful or So What* and *Stranger to Stranger, Seven Psalms* is unlike any other Paul Simon creation.

For one thing, the album is a single composition in seven movements—33 minutes formatted as one track. It's also nearly a solo spotlight, focused throughout on Simon's voice and acoustic guitar—primarily a Gurian that has been a longstanding favorite. His fingerstyle guitar arrangements on the album, gorgeously captured by engineer and co-producer Kyle Crusham, are so detailed and melodic they could nearly stand as instrumental pieces.

Acoustic guitar has always been central to Simon's music, and his late-era albums have included lovely guitar moments such as "Questions for the Angels" (*So Beautiful or So What*) and the instrumental "In the Garden of Edie" (*Stranger to Stranger*). But *Seven Psalms* sheds a new light on Simon's considerable gifts as a guitarist, which have been somewhat overshadowed by the power and range of his songwriting.

The album opens with an Am–G–D/F♯ guitar figure in the movement called "The Lord" that returns, with varying lyrics, in the middle and toward the end. "The Lord is an engineer," he sings. "The Lord is the earth I ride on." As the piece unfolds, the metaphors point in many directions, from "The Covid virus is the Lord" and "The Lord is the ocean rising" to "The Lord is my record producer" and "The Lord is the music I hear." Referencing the Old Testament's Book of Psalms, *Seven Psalms* is on one level a meditation on faith—maintaining it, questioning it—though the lyrics, not surprisingly given their origin in dreams, resist easy summary or interpretation.

While most of the album is softly meditative, Simon's wry humor makes an appearance on "Professional Opinion," a playful blues. "Good morning, Mr. Indignation/ Looks like you haven't slept all night," he sings, harmonizing with his voice with sliding double-stops up the neck. "In my professional opinion/ Go back to bed and turn off your light."

Enhancing the atmosphere around Simon's voice and guitar are touches of instruments such as gongs, bells, harmonium, frame drum, and bass harmonica played by Simon himself, plus a subtly employed chorus (the British group Voces8) and a chamber orchestra. Simon's wife, Edie Brickell, joins for intimate duets toward the end on "The Sacred Harp" and "Wait."

In the album's final movement, he seems to address his apparent retirement in recent years. Over a spacious descending guitar line, he sings:

Wait
I'm not ready
I'm just packing my gear
Wait
My hand's steady
My mind is still clear

At this juncture, after so many musical milestones over the last six decades, we can all be grateful that Simon remains on the path: still curious, still steady, and still surprising himself—and us—with what he discovers. **AG**

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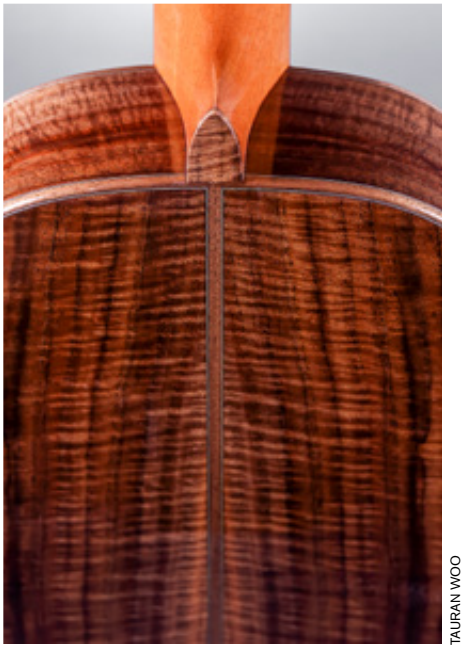
2022 Greg Brandt Custom Concert Model

A traditional classical guitar with unique, eye-catching ornamentation

BY GREG OLWELL







TAURAN WOO

When it comes to instrument design, the nylon-string guitar community's appetite for change is modest compared to that of the steel-string world. Push the wood choices or decorative elements too far outside the standards set by early Spanish builders like Antonio de Torres Jurado, and a luthier risks alienating players. And yet, some classical makers manage to successfully add unique touches to their concert instruments.

All of the pieces fit together for Greg Brandt when he built this "jigsaw puzzle" guitar for the last California International Guitar Festival (formerly La Guitarra), held in San Luis Obispo in September 2022. "I try to make my show guitars be show-off guitars," the Los Angeles–based luthier says.

This show-off guitar started with a hunk of super curly black walnut for the back and sides, as well as a rosette comprised of pieces of koa, walnut, tulipwood, padauk, and bog white oak, fitting together like a jigsaw puzzle. "It took me some time to make the rosette happen," Brandt says. "I had it before I cut up the walnut, and once I did, I knew this was the rosette I wanted to use."

After Brandt assembled the guitar—relatively traditional with its cedar top, Honduran mahogany neck, 650mm scale ebony fretboard, and 52mm nut—he added matching jigsaw inlays to the butt end as well as the bridge's tie bar. He acknowledges that he took a few chances in stepping outside of the norm with the jigsaw puzzle motif. "I know from experience that some purists may not like it, but so be it," Brandt says. "I was able to get what I aim to get out of all my guitars—a bass with a strong fundamental, singing trebles, evenness across and up and down the fingerboard, and a wide tonal palette." AG

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